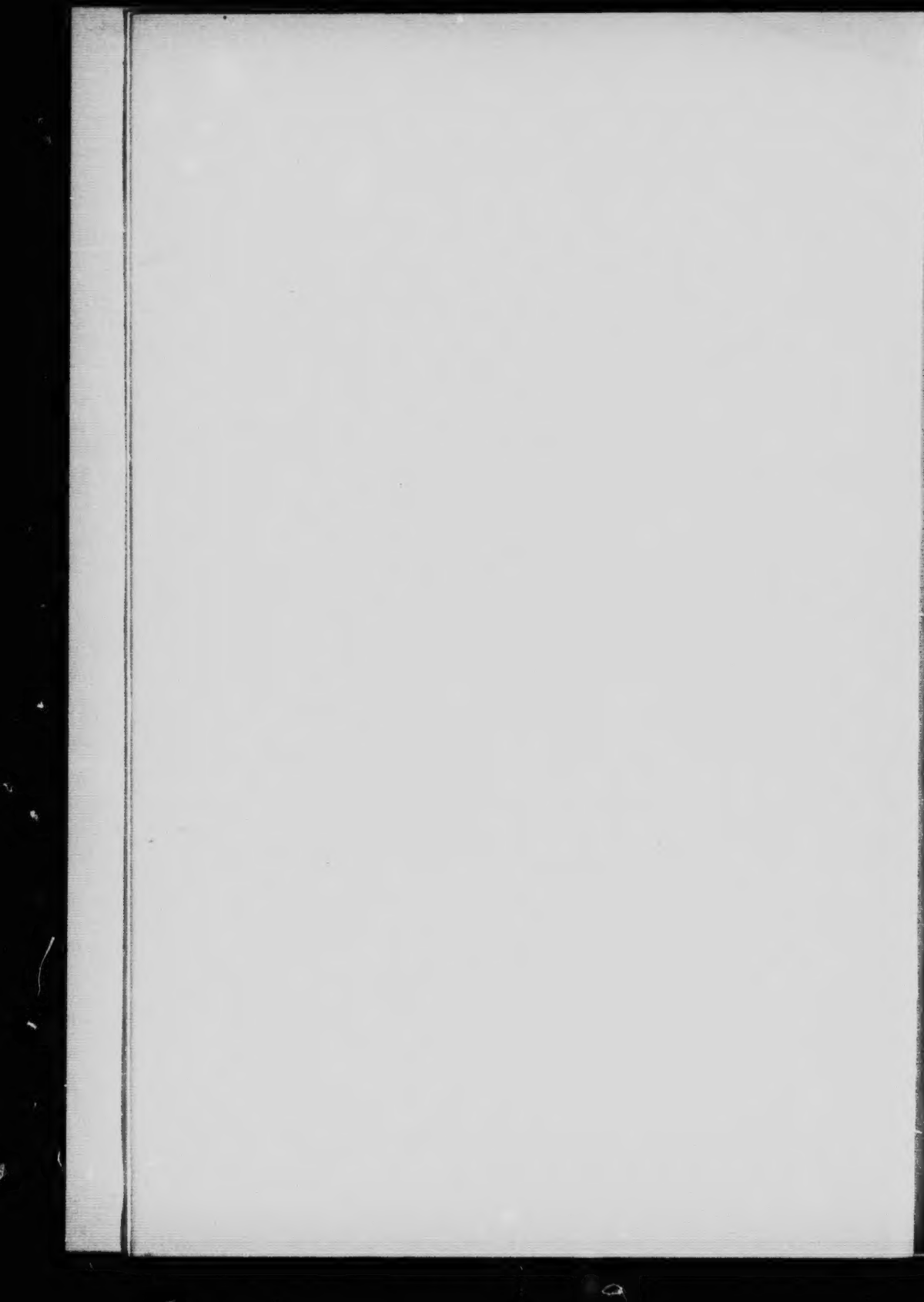
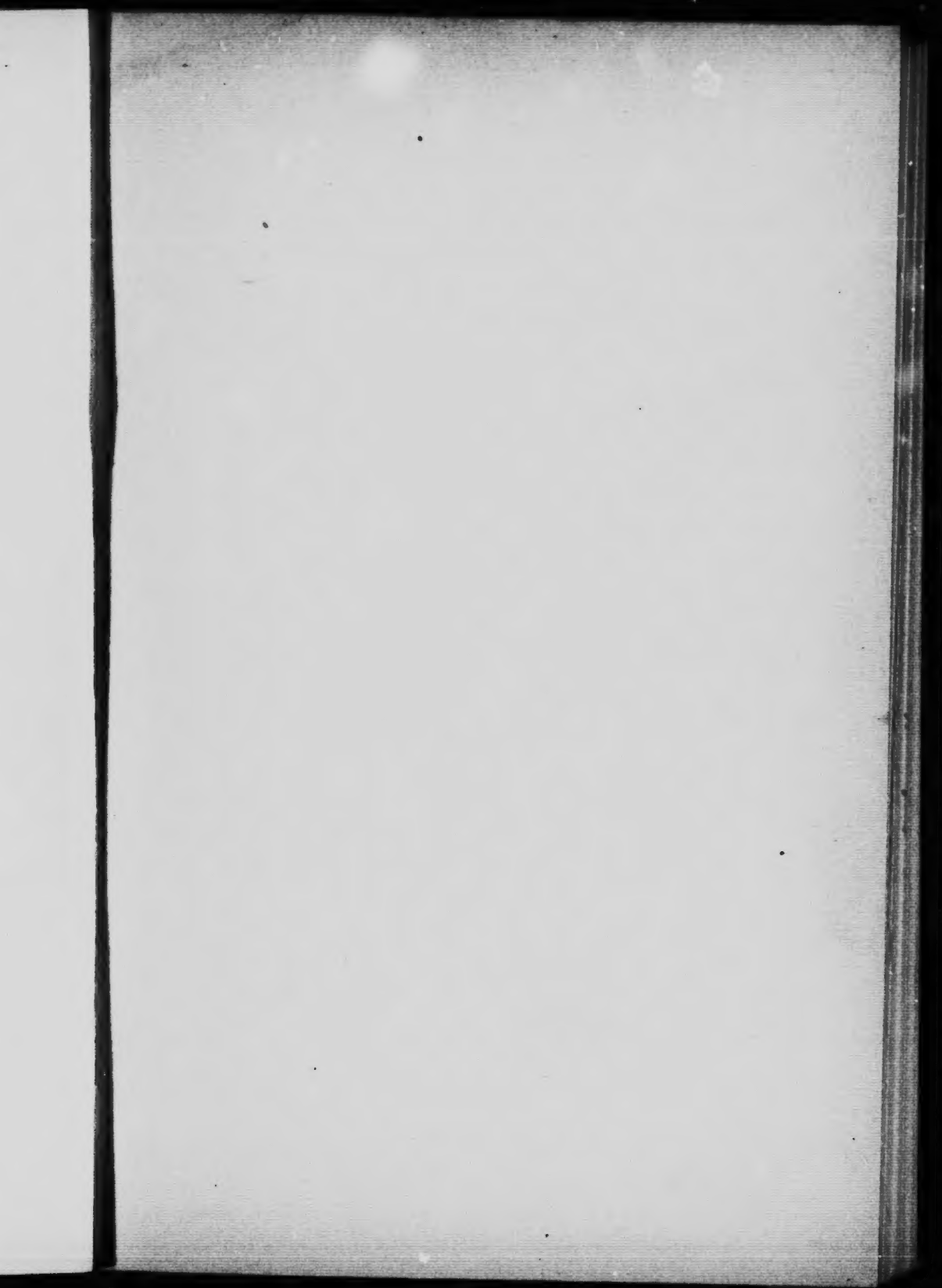




**THE COLONEL OF
THE RED HUZZARS**

SEVENTH EDITION





THEN, AS HE UNBENT, HIS EYES RESTED ON ME FOR THE FIRST TIME

THE COLONEL OF THE RED HUZZARS

BY
JOHN REED SCOTT

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR
BY CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

MONTREAL, CANADA
MONTREAL NEWS COMPANY

1906

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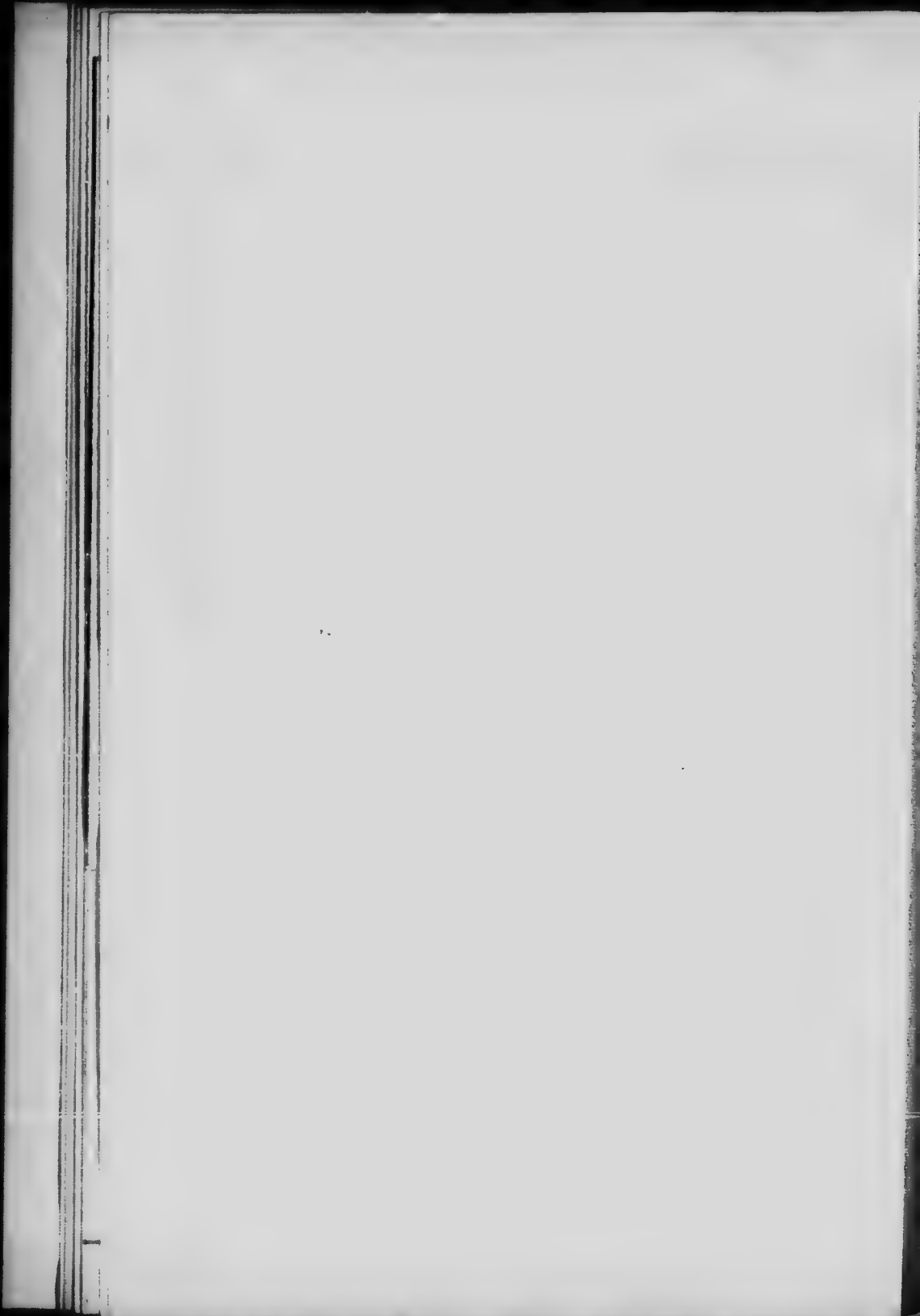
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TO MY WIFE



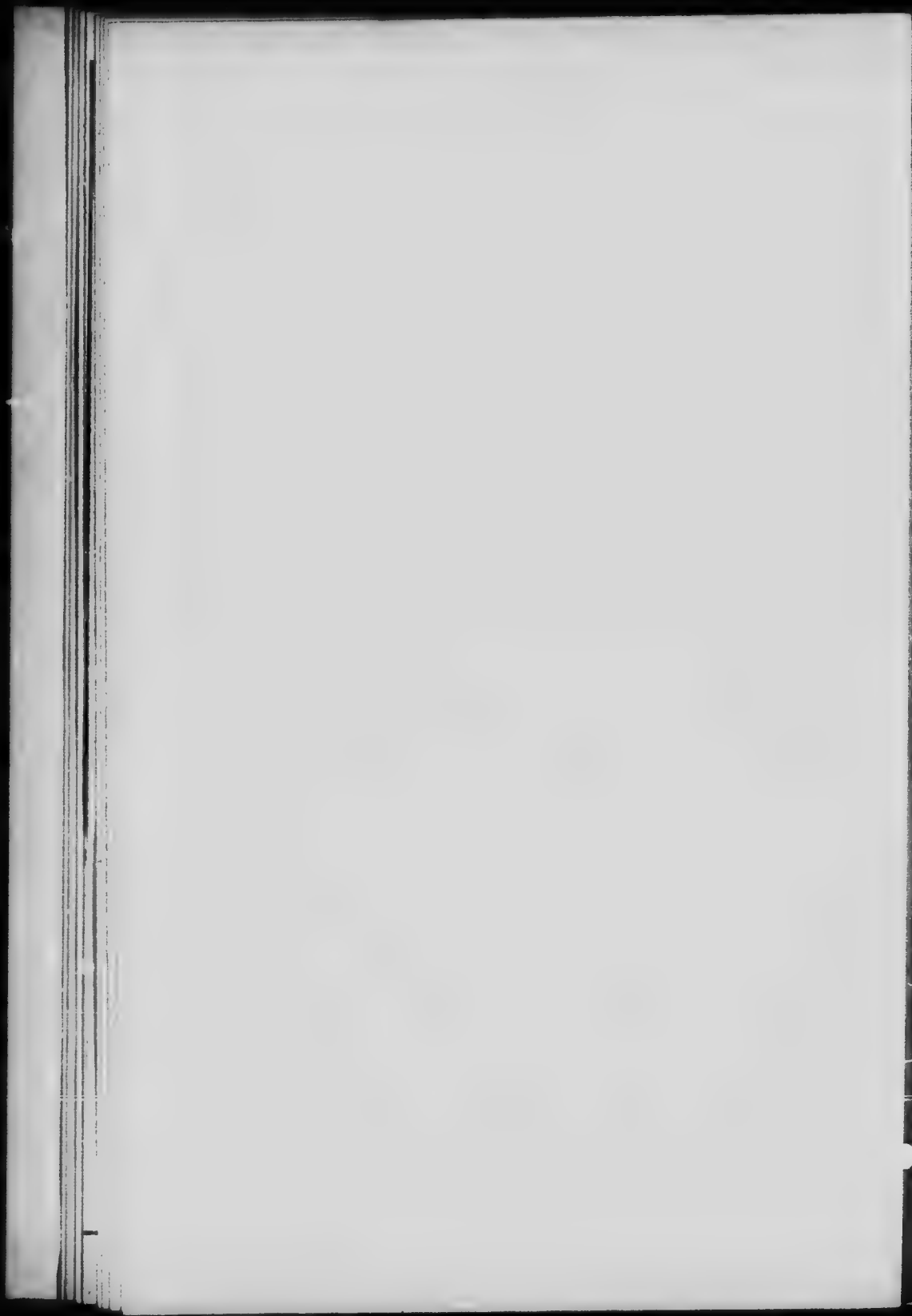
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THE COLONEL OF THE RED HUZZARS

I

A PICTURE AND A WAGER

It was raining heavily and I fastened my overcoat to the neck as I came down the steps of the Government Building. Pushing through the crowds and clanging electric cars, at the Smithfield Street corner, I turned toward Penn Avenue and the Club, whose home is in a big, old-fashioned, grey-stone building—sole remnant of aristocracy in that section where, once, naught else had been.

For three years I had been the engineer officer in charge of the Pittsburgh Harbor, and "the navigable rivers thereunto belonging"—as my friend, the District Judge, across the hall, would say—and my relief was due next week. Nor was I sorry. I was tired of dams and bridges and jobs, of levels and blue prints and mathematics. I wanted my sword and pistols—a horse between my legs—the smell of gunpowder in the air. I craved action—something more stirring than dirty banks and filthy water and coal-barges bound for Southern markets.

Five years ago my detail would have been the envy of half the Corps. But times were changed. The Spanish War had done more than give straps to a

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lot of civilians with pulls; it had eradicated the dry-rot from the Army. The officer with the soft berth was no longer deemed lucky; promotion passed him by and seized upon his fellow in the field. I had missed the war in China and the fighting in the Philippines and, as a consequence, had seen juniors lifted over me. Yet, possibly, I had small cause to grumble; for my own gold leaves had dropped upon me in Cuba, to the disadvantage of many who were my elders, and, doubtless, my betters as well. I had applied for active service, but evidently it had not met with approval, for my original orders to report to the Chief of Engineers were still unchanged.

The half dozen "regulars," lounging on the big leather chairs before the fireplace in the Club reception-room, waiting for the dinner hour, gave me the usual familiar yet half indifferent greeting, as I took my place among them and lit a cigar.

"Mighty sorry we're to lose you, Major," said Marmont. "Dinner won't seem quite right with your chair vacant."

"I'll come back occasionally to fill it," I answered. "Meanwhile there are cards awaiting all of you at the Metropolitan or the Army and Navy."

"Then you don't look for an early assignment to the White Elephant across the Pacific?" inquired Courtney.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Hastings, "did you apply for the Philippines?"

"What ails them?" I asked.

"Everything—particularly Chaffee's notion that white uniforms don't suit the climate?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Is that a criticism of your superior officer?" Marmont demanded.

"That is never done in the Army," I answered.

"Which being the case let us take a drink," said Westlake, and led the way to the café.

"Looks rather squally in Europe," Courtney observed, as the dice were deciding the privilege of signing the check.

"It will blow over, I fancy," I answered.

"Have you seen the afternoon papers?"

"No."

"Then you don't know the Titian Ambassador has been recalled."

"Indeed! Well, I still doubt if it means fight."

Courtney stroked his grey imperial. "Getting rather near one, don't you think?" he said.

"No closer than France and Turkey were only a short while ago," I answered. "Moreover, in this case, the Powers would have a word to say."

"Yes, they are rather ready to speak out on such occasions; but, unless I'm much mistaken, if the Titians and the Valerians get their armies moving it will take more than talk from the Powers to stop them."

"And it's all over a woman," I observed carelessly.

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Courtney gave me a sharp glance. "I thought that was rather a secret," he replied.

I laughed. "It's one, at least, that the newspapers have not discovered—yet. But, where did you get it?"

"From a friend; same as yourself," he said, with the suggestion of a smile.

"My dear fellow," I said. "I know more about the Kingdom of Valeria than—well, than your friend and all his assistants of the State Department."

"I don't recall mentioning the State Department," Courtney replied.

"You didn't. I was honoring your friend by rating him among the diplomats."

He ignored my thrust. "Ever been to Valeria?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Recently?"

"About six years ago."

"Is that the last time?"

"What are you driving at?" I asked.

He answered with another question: "Seen the last number of the London Illustrated News?"

"No," I answered.

He struck the bell. "Bring me the London News," he said to the boy. Opening it at the frontispiece he pushed it across to me.

"Has she changed much since you saw her?" he asked, and smiled.

It was a woman's face that looked at me from the page; and, though it was six years since I had seen it last, I recognised it instantly. There was, however, a certain coldness in the eyes and a firm set of the lip and jaw that were new to me. But, as I looked, they seemed to soften, and I could have sworn that for an instant the Princess Dehra of Valeria smiled at me most sweetly—even as once she herself had done.

"You seem uncommonly well pleased with the lady," Courtney observed.

I handed back the News.

"You have not answered my question," he insisted.

"Look here, Courtney," I said, "it seems to me you are infernally inquisitive to-night."

"Maybe I am—only, I wanted to know something," and he laughed softly.

"Well?"

"I think I know it now," he said.

"Do you?" I retorted.

"Want to make a bet?" he asked.

"I never bet on a certainty," said I.

Courtney laughed. "Neither do I, so here's the wager:—a dinner for twenty that you and I are in Valeria thirty days from to-night and have dined with the King and danced with the Princess."

"Done!" said I.

"All I stipulate is that you do nothing to avoid King Frederick's invitation."

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"And the Princess?" I asked.

"I'm counting on her to win me the bet," he laughed.

I picked up the picture and studied it again. The longer I looked the more willing I was to give Courtney a chance to eat my dinner.

"If the opportunity comes I'll dance with her," I said.

"Of course you will—but will you stop there, I wonder?"

I tapped my grey-besprinkled hair.

"They are no protection," he said. "I don't trust even my own to keep me steady against a handsome woman."

"They are playing us false even now," said I. "I'm not going to Valeria to decide a dinner bet."

"You're not. You're going as the representative of our Army to observe the Valerian-Titian War."

"You're as good as a gypsy or a medium. When do I start?"

"Don't be rude, my dear chap, and forget that, under the wager, I'm to be in the King's invitation—also the dance. We sail one week from to-day."

"A bit late to secure accommodations, isn't it?"

"They are booked—on the Wilhelm der Grosse."

"You are playing a long shot—several long shots," I laughed:—"War—Washington—me."

"Wrong," said Courtney. "I'm playing only War. I have the Secretary and the Princess has you."

"You have the Secretary!"

"Days ago."

"The Devil!" I exclaimed, lifting my glass abstractedly.

"The Princess! you mean," said Courtney quickly, lifting his own and clicking mine.

I looked at the picture again—and again it seemed to smile at me.

"The Princess!" I echoed; and we drank the toast. "We're a pair of old fools," said I, when the glasses were emptied.

Courtney picked up the News and held the picture before me.

"Say that to her," he challenged.

"I can't be rude to her very face," I answered lamely.

Just then one of the "buttons" handed me a telegram. I tore open the yellow envelope and read the sheet, still damp from the copy-press. It ran:—

"Titia declares war. Detail as attaché open.
If desired report at headquarters immediately.
Hennecker relieves you in morning. Answer."

"(signed) HENDERSON, A. A. G."

I tossed it over to Courtney. "You're that much nearer the dinner," I said.

"And the Princess also," he added.

"Then you're actually going?" I asked.

"My dear Major, did you ever doubt it?"

"Your vagaries are past doubting," I answered.

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"And yours?"

"I am going under orders of the War Department."

"Of course," he answered, "of course. And, that being so, you won't mind my confessing that I'm going largely on account of—a woman."

"I won't mind anything that gives me your companionship."

"So, it's settled," he said. "Let us have some dinner, and then cut in for a farewell turn in the game of hearts upstairs."

"It will be another sort of game over the water," I observed.

"Yes—with a different sort of hearts," he said thoughtfully.

"Is it possible, Courtney, you are growing sentimental?" I demanded.

He shrugged his shoulders. "There's no fool like an old fool, you know," he answered.

"Unless it be one that is just old enough to be neither old nor young," said I.

Then we went in to dinner.

Courtney is a good fellow; one of the best friends a man can have; well born, rich, with powerful political connections in both Parties, and having no profession nor necessary occupation to tie him down. His tastes ran to diplomacy, and Secretaries of State—knowing this fact, and being further advised of it at various times by certain prominent Senators—had given him numerous secret missions

to both Europe and South America. Legations had been offered to him but these he had always declined; for, as he told me, he preferred the quiet, independent work, that carried no responsible social duties with it.

It happened that General Russell, our representative at the Court of Valeria, was home on vacation. Naturally, he would now return in all haste. Here, I imagined, was an explanation of my sudden orders. He was an intimate of our family; had known me since childhood, and, doubtless, had asked for my detail to his household, and also for Courtney's. And Courtney, naturally, having been early consulted in the matter, knew all the facts and so was able to bluff at me with them. It would be just as well to call him.

"Is General Russell crossing with us?" I asked carelessly.

Courtney shook his head. "He is not going back to Valeria."

"Oh!" said I, realizing suddenly my mistake, "I didn't appreciate I was dining with an Ambassador."

"It's not yet announced. However, I'm glad it does not change me," he laughed.

"I can tell that better after we reach Valeria—and you have danced with the Princess."

He sipped his coffee meditatively. "Yes, there may be changes in Valeria in us both," he said presently.

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"Don't do the heavy reproof if I chance to forget the difference in our rank," I answered. "But you must manage one turn for me with Her Royal Highness, if you're to eat my dinner, you know."

"How many times have you been to Valeria?" he asked suddenly.

"Some half dozen," I replied, surprised.

"Ever been in the private apartments of the Palace of Dornlitz?"

"No—I think not."

"I mean, particularly, the corridor where hang the portraits of the Kings?"

"I don't recall them."

He laughed shortly. "Believe me, you would recall them well," he said.

"What the devil are you driving at?" I asked.

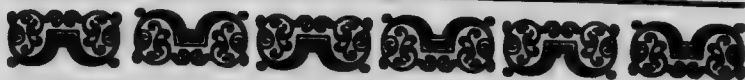
"I'll show you the night you dance with the Princess."

"A poor army officer doesn't usually have such honors."

"No—not if he be only a poor army officer. But, if he chance to be——"

"Well," I said, "be what?"

"I'll tell you in the picture gallery," he answered. And not another word would he say in the matter.



II

CONCERNING ANCESTORS

HOWEVER, I did not need to wait so long for my answer. I knew it quite as well as Courtney—maybe a trifle better. Nevertheless, it is a bit jolting to realize, suddenly, that some one has been prying into your family history.

On the west wall of the Corridor of Kings, in the Palace of Dornlitz, hung the full-length portrait of Henry, third of the name and tenth of the Line. A hundred and more years had passed since he went to his uncertain reward; and now, in me, his great-great-grandson, were his face and figure come back to earth.

I had said, truly enough, that I had never been in the Gallery of Kings. But it was not necessary for me to go there to learn of this resemblance to my famous ancestor. For, handed down from eldest son to eldest son, since the first Dalberg came to American shores, and, so, in my possession now, was an ivory miniature of the very portrait which Courtney had in mind.

And the way of it, and how I chanced to be of the blood royal of Valeria, was thus:

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Henry the Third—he of the portrait—had two sons, Frederick and Hugo, and one daughter, Adela. Frederick, the elder son, in due time came to the throne and, dying, passed the title to his only child, Henry; who, in turn, was succeeded by his only child, Frederick, the present monarch.

Adela, the daughter, married Casimir, King of Titia,—and of her descendants more anon.

Hugo, the younger son, was born some ten years after his brother,—to be accurate, in 1756,—and after the old King had laid aside his sword and retired into the quiet of his later years. With an honestly inherited love of fighting, and the inborn hostility to England that, even then, had existed in the Valerians for a hundred years, Hugo watched with quickening interest the struggle between the North American Colonies and Great Britain which began in 1775. When the Marquis de Lafayette threw in his fortunes with the Americans, Hugo had begged permission to follow the same course. This the old King had sternly refused; pointing out its impropriety from both a political and a family aspect.

But Hugo was far from satisfied, and his desire to have a chance at England waxing in proportion as the Colonies' fortunes waned, he at last determined to brave his fierce old father and join the struggling American army whether his sire willed it or no. His mind once formed, he would have been no true son of Henry had he hesitated.

The King heard him quietly to the end,—too quietly, indeed, to presage well for Hugo. Then he answered:

"I take it sir, your decision is made beyond words of mine to change. Of course, I could clap you into prison and cool your hot blood with scant diet and chill stones, but such would be scarce fitting for a Dalberg. Neither is it fitting that a Prince of Valeria should fight against a country with which I am at peace. Therefore, the day you leave for America will see your name stricken from the rolls of our House, your title revoked, and your return here prohibited by royal decree. Do I make myself understood?"

So far as I have been able to learn, no one ever accused my great-grandfather of an inability to understand plain speech, and old Henry's was not obscure. Indeed, Hugo remembered it so well that he made it a sort of preface in the Journal which he began some months thereafter, and kept most carefully to the very last day of his life. The Journal says he made no answer to his father save a low bow.

Two days later, as plain Hugo Dalberg, he departed for America. For some time he was a volunteer Aide to General Washington. Later, Congress commissioned him colonel of a regiment of horse; and, as such, he served to the close of the war. When the Continental Army was disbanded, he purchased a place upon the eastern shore of

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Maryland; and, marrying into one of the aristocratic families of the neighborhood, settled down to the life of a simple country gentleman.

He never went back to the land of his birth, nor, indeed, even to Europe. And this, though, one day, there came to his mansion on the Chesapeake the Valerian Minister to America and, with many bows and genuflections, presented a letter from his brother Frederick, announcing the death of their royal father and his own accession, and offering to restore to Hugo his rank and estates if he would return to court.

And this letter, like his sword, his Order of the Cincinnati, his commissions and the miniature, has been the heritage of the eldest son. In his soldier days his nearest comrade had been Armand, Marquis de la Rouerie, and for him his first-born was christened; and hence my own queer name—for an American: Armand Dalberg.

There was one of the traditions of our House that had been scrupulously honored: there was always a Dalberg on the rolls of the Army; though not always was it the head of the family, as in my case. For the rest, we buried our royal descent. And though it was, naturally, well known to my great-grandsire's friends and neighbors, yet, in the succeeding generations, it has been forgotten and never had I heard it referred to by a stranger.

Therefore, I was surprised and a trifle annoyed at Courtney's discovery. Of course, it was possible

that he had been attracted only by my physical resemblance to the Third Henry and was not aware of the relationship; but this was absurdly unlikely. Courtney was not one to stop at half a truth and Dalberg was no common name. Doubtless the picture had first put him on the track and after that the rest was easy. What he did not know, however, but had been manœuvring to discover, was how far I was known at the Court of Valeria. Well, he was welcome to what he had got.

Now, as a matter of fact, it was quite likely that the Dalbergs of Dornlitz had totally forgotten the Dalbergs of America. Since Frederick's minister had rumbled away from that mansion on the Chesapeake, a century and more ago, there had been no word passed between us. Why should there be? We had been disinherited and banished. They had had their offer of reinstatement courteously refused. We were quits.

I think I was the first of the family to set foot within Valeria since Hugo left it. Ten years ago, during a summer's idling in Europe, I had been seized with the desire to see the land of my people. It was a breaking of our most solemn canon, yet I broke it none the less. Nor was that the only time. However, I had the grace,—and, possibly, the precaution,—to change my name on such occasions. In the Kingdom of Valeria I was that well-known American, Mr. John Smith.

I did the ordinary tourist; visited the places of

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interest, and put up at the regular hotels. Occasionally, I was stared at rather impertinently by some officer of the Guards and I knew he had noted my resemblance to the national hero. I never made any effort to be presented to His Majesty nor to establish my relationship. I should have been much annoyed had anything led to it being discovered.

Once, in the park of the palace, I had passed the King walking with a single aide-de-camp, and his surprise was such he clean forgot to return my salute; and a glance back showed him at a stand and gazing after me. I knew he was thinking of the portrait in the Corridor of Kings. That was the last time I had seen my royal cousin.

The next day, while riding along a secluded bridle path some miles from Dornlitz, I came upon a woman leading a badly-limping horse. She was alone,—no groom in sight,—and drawing rein I dismounted and asked if I could be of service. Then I saw her face, and stepped back in surprise. Her pictures were too plentiful in the capital for me to make mistake. It was the Princess Dehra.

I bowed low. "Your Royal Highness's pardon," I said. "I did not mean to presume."

She measured me in a glance. "Indeed, you are most opportune," she said, with a frank smile. "I have lost the groom,—his horse was too slow,—and I've been punished by Lotta picking a stone I cannot remove."

"By your leave," I said, and lifted the mare's hoof. Pressing back the frog I drew out the lump of sharp gravel.

"It looks so easy," she said.

"It was paining her exceedingly, but she is all right now."

"Then I may mount?"

I bowed.

"Without hurting Lotta?" she asked.

I turned the mare about and dropped my hand into position. For a moment she hesitated. Then there was the swish of a riding skirt, the glint of a patent-leather boot, an arched foot in my palm, and without an ounce of lift from me she was in the saddle.

I stepped back and raised my hat.

She gathered the reins slowly; then bent and patted the mare's neck.

I made no move.

"I am waiting," she said presently, with a quick glance my way.

"I do not see the groom," said I, looking back along the road.

She gave a little laugh. "You won't," she said. "He thinks I went another way."

"Then Your Highness means——"

"You do not look so stupid," she remarked.

"Sometimes men's looks are deceiving."

"Then, sir, Her Highness means she is waiting for you to mount," she said, very graciously.

"As her groom?" I asked.

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"As anything you choose, so long as you ride beside me to the hill above the Park."

I took saddle at the vault and we trotted away.

"Why did you make me ask for your attendance?" she demanded.

"Because I dared not offer it."

"Another deception in your looks," she replied.

I laughed. She had evened up.

"You are a soldier—an American officer?" she said suddenly.

"Your Highness has guessed most shrewdly," I answered, in surprise.

"Are you staying at the Embassy?" she asked.

"No," said I. "I am not on the staff. I am only a bird of passage."

"Do you know General Russell?"

"My father knew him, I believe," I answered, evasively, and turned the talk into less personal matters.

When we reached the hill I drew rein. Down in the valley lay the Summer Palace and the gates of the Park were but a few hundred yards below us. I dismounted to say good-bye.

"I am very grateful for your courtesy," she said.

"It is for the stranger to be grateful for your trust," I answered.

She smiled,—that smile was getting into my poor brain—"A woman usually knows a gentleman," she said.

I bowed.

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"YOU ARE A SOLDIER—AN AMERICAN OFFICER?" SHE SAID, SUDDENLY

"And under certain circumstances she likes to know his name," she added.

For a moment I was undecided. Should I tell her and claim my cousinship? I was sorely tempted. Then I saw what a mistake it would be,—she would not believe it,—and answered:

"John Smith, Your Royal Highness, and your most obedient servant."

She must have noticed my hesitation, for she studied my face an instant, then said, with a pause between each word and a peculiar stress on the name:

"General—Smith?"

"Simple Captain," I answered. "We do not climb so rapidly in our Army."

Just then, from the barracks three miles away, came the boom of the evening gun.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "I am late. I must hasten. Good-bye, *mon Capitaine*; you have been very kind."

She drew off her gauntlet and extended her hand. I bent and kissed,—possibly too lingeringly,—the little fingers.

"Farewell, Princess," I said. And then, half under my breath, I added: "Till we meet again."

She heard, and again that smile. "'*Auf Wiedersehen*' be it," she answered.

Then she rode away.

I leaned against my horse's shoulder and watched her as she went slowly down the hill, the full glory

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of the sinking sun upon her, and the shadows of the great trees close on either side. Presently there came a bend in the road and, turning in the saddle, she waved her hand.

I answered with my hat. Then she was gone.

That was how I met the Princess Royal of Valeria. And, unless she has told it (which, somehow, I doubt), none knows it but ourselves. I had never seen her since. Perhaps that is why I was quite content for Courtney to win his bet. Truly, a man's heart does not age with his hair.



III

IN DORNLITZ AGAIN

THE declaration of war by Titia had come so suddenly that when Courtney and I sailed for Europe, the Powers were still in the air and watching one another. No battle had been fought; but the armies were frowning at each other on the frontier, and several skirmishes had occurred.

Ostensibly, the trouble was over a slice of territory which Henry the Third had taken from Titia as an indemnity for some real or fancied wrongs done him. Valeria, with its great general and powerful army, was too strong in those days for Titia to do more than protest—and, then, to take its punishment, which, for some reason that was doubtless sufficient to him, Henry had seen fit to make as easy as it might be, by giving his daughter, Adela, to Casimir for wife.

Whether the lady went voluntarily or not I cannot say. Yet it was, doubtless, the same with both Kings: The one got an unwilling province; the other, an unwilling bride. Only, Titia's trouble was soonest over.

This ravished Murdol had always been a standing

menace to the peace of the two countries; Titia had never forgiven its seizure, and Valeria was afflicted with the plague of disaffected subjects on its very border. Here, as I have said, was the real *casus belli*,—a constant irritation that had at length got past bearing.

But, in truth, the actual breach was due to a woman. The Crown Prince of Titia had come a wooing of the Princess Royal of Valeria, and had been twice refused by her. King Frederick had left the question entirely in her hands. Her choice was her own, to marry or to decline. As a matter of state policy the match was greatly desired by him and his Ministers. They were becoming very weary of Murdol and the turmoil it maintained on the border, and the great force of troops required there to preserve order. Then, too, Titia had grown vastly in wealth and population since old Henry's time, and, now, was likely more than a match for its ancient enemy. Frederick was aging and desired peace in his closing years. He had long wished for a diplomatic way to rid himself of the troublesome province, and the marriage of Casimir and Dehra would afford it. Murdol could be settled upon the Princess as her dower.

It was an admirable solution of the whole vexing question. Yet, unlike old Henry, Frederick was the father before he was the King; and, beyond telling the Princess frankly the policy which moved him in the matter, he did nothing to coerce her. But the

Ministers had no scruples of affection nor of kinship to control them and they brought all sorts of persuasive pressure upon her to obtain her consent to the match. All this was known to the Kingdom, and the vast majority of the people were with the Princess. The Army was with her to a man.

The first proposal Dehra had declined promptly to the Prince in person. He had made it lover-like, and not through the diplomatic channels. After that the Titian Foreign Office took a hand, and the poor girl's troubles began.

For six months the matter pended,—and still Dehra held firm. Then Titia mobilized its army and demanded a decision within two days:—either the Princess or Murdol. It got a "No" in two hours. The declaration of war followed straightway.

Most of these facts were already known to me. Those of latest happening came to Courtney from the State Department on the eve of our sailing.

"It looks like a one-battle war," he had observed.

"Add a letter to your sentence and you will be nearer right," I answered.

He laughed. "A none-battle war, you mean."

And so it proved. When we landed it was to find that Germany had offered to mediate, and that, while the two Kingdoms were thinking it over, a truce had been declared. Consequently, instead of hurrying straight to the Valerian army. I journeyed leisurely with Courtney to the capital. There

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the first news that met us was that Germany's mediation had been accepted and that the war was at an end—for the present at least.

So, once again, had the Powers, in the interest of European peace, struck up the swords.

As we drove from the station to the Embassy we observed flags flying from almost every house, and that the public buildings were lavishly decorated.

"Peace seems to be well received," I remarked.

"It's the King's birthday," Courtney answered.

"And a very happy one, I fancy."

Courtney stared at me. "How so?" he said.

"He can now both keep his daughter and be rid of Murdol."

"The Princess is saved, of course, but in deference to the national self-respect, he dare give up Murdol only in one contingency:—if Titia can be persuaded to pay a money value for it. Which I doubt."

I said nothing. I, too, doubted.

"However, it's not important to us," said he "Whatever the outcome the lady will be here long enough for you to lose the wager."

"Damn the wager," I exclaimed.

"Damn everything you have a mind to, my dear fellow," he encouraged.

"And you in particular," I said.

"Wherefore, my dear Major?" he laughed.

"For suggesting this fool thing."

"Poor boy! I should have regarded your youthful impetuosity."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"And grey hairs," he added.

"I've a mind to toss you out of the carriage," said I.

"Do it,—and save me the trouble of getting myself out," he answered; and then we drew under the *ports cochère* at the Embassy.

The matter of a residence had not bothered Courtney. He simply took General Russell's lease off his hands, and twenty thousand a year rent with it. I was to live at the Legation, there being no Ambassadorial women folks to make the staff *de trop*. Naturally, I was quite satisfied. It was a bit preferable to hotel hospitality. And, then, the assistants were good fellows.

Cosgrove, who had been First Secretary for ten years, was from the estate next my own on the Eastern Shore. It was through him I had been able to preserve my incog. so securely during my former visits to Valeria. And if he had any curiosity as to my motives, he was courteous enough never to show it. "The best assistant in Europe," Courtney had once pronounced him.

Then there was Pryor, the Naval Attaché. He had been off "cruising with the Army," as Cosgrove put it, pending my arrival and was not yet returned to Dornlitz. The others of the office force were young fellows,—rich boys, either *in presente* or *futuro*,—who, likely, could only be depended upon to do the wrong thing. Being fit for nothing at

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home, therefore, they had been considered to be particularly well qualified for the American diplomatic service.

My room overlooked the Avenue, and the writing-desk was near the window. I was drawing the formal report to the War Department of my arrival at Dornlitz and the status political and military, when the clatter of hoofs on the driveway drew my attention. It was a tall officer in the green-and-gold of the Royal Guards, and pulling up sharply he tossed his rein to his orderly. I heard the door open and voices in the hall; and, then, in a few minutes, he came out and rode away, with the stiff, hard seat of the European cavalryman. I was still watching him when Courtney entered.

"What do you think of him?" he asked.

"I haven't seen enough of him to think," said I.

"Not even enough to wonder who he is?"

I yawned. "His uniform tells me he is a colonel of the Guard."

"But nothing else?"

"I can read a bit more."

"From the uniform?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You're a veritable Daniel," Courtney laughed. "What saith the writing—or rather, what saith the uniform?"

"It's very simple to those who read uniforms."

"So!" said he. "I await the interpretation."

"It's too easy," I retorted. "A Point Plebe could

do it. Your visitor was one of His Majesty's Aides-de-Camp bearing an invitation to the ball at the Palace to-night."

For once I saw Courtney's face show surprise.

"How did you guess it?" he said, after a pause.

"A diplomat should watch the newspapers," said I, and pointed to this item in the Court News of that morning's issue:

"His Excellency the Honorable Richard Courtney, the newly accredited American Ambassador, is expected to arrive to-day. He is accompanied by Major Dalberg, the Military Attaché. His Majesty has ordered his Aide-de-Camp, Colonel Bernheim, to invite them to the Birthday Ball to-night; where they will be honored by a special presentation."

Courtney read it carefully. "At last I see the simple truth in a daily paper," he commented. "But, as for you, my friend, button your coat well over your heart for it's in for a hard thump to-night."

"So?" said I.

"There won't be so much indifference after you've met Her and—seen a certain picture in the Corridor of Kings," he retorted, with a superior smile.

"Think not?" said I, with another yawn. "What if I've done both years ago?"

He eyed me sharply. "It's foolish to bluff when a show-down is certain," he said.

"So one learns in the army."

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"Of course not every hand needs to bluff," he said slowly.

"No—not every hand," I agreed.

He went over to the door. On the threshold he turned.

"I wonder if this is my laugh, or yours, to-night," he said.

"We will laugh together," I answered.

Then he went out.



IV

THE SALUTE OF A COUSIN

I WOULD have been rather a wooden sort of individual had I felt no stir in my heart as, for the first time, I entered the Castle of my ancestors and stood in the ante-chamber waiting to be presented to the Head of my House. I believe I am as phlegmatic as most men, but I would give very little for one who, under like conditions, would not feel a press of emotion. I know it came to me with sharp intensity,—and I see no shame in the admission; nor will any one else whose heart is the heart of an honest man. I have no patience with those creatures who deride sentiment. They are either liars or idiots. Religion, itself, is sentimental; and so is every refined instinct of our lives. Destroy the sentimental in man and the brute alone remains.

We waited but a moment and then were ushered into the royal presence. The greeting was entirely informal. Courtney was no stranger to Valeria, and had met the King frequently during the last ten years. Frederick came forward and shook his hand most cordially and welcomed him to Court. It was like the meeting of two friends. During it I had time to observe the King.

He wore the green uniform of a General, with the Jewel of the Order of the Lion around his neck. His sixty odd years sat very lightly and left no mark save in the facial wrinkles and grey hair. He was a true Dalberg in height and general appearance, and with the strong, straight nose that was as distinctive to our family as was the beak to the Bourbons.

I had remained in the background during Courtney's greeting, but, when he turned and presented me, I advanced and bowed. As I straightened, the King extended his hand saying:

"We are glad to——"

Then he caught a full view of my face and stopped, staring. I dropped his hand and stepped back; and, for a space, no one moved. Only, I shot a side glance at Courtney and caught a half smile on his lips. Then Frederick recovered himself.

"Your pardon, sir, but I did not catch the name," he said.

Courtney's finesse saved me the embarrassment of a self-introduction.

"Major Dalberg, of the United States Army, Your Majesty," he said quickly. "The representative of our War Department with your army."

"Dalberg—Dalberg," he muttered; then added, perfunctorily: "Our army is at your service, sir, though I fear we shall be unable to give you the war."

"The army is quite enough, Sire," I began; but it was plain he did not hear me. He was studying

my face again and thinking. Courtney, I could see, was having the finest sort of sport. I could have throttled him..

"You have our name, Major," said the King. "May I ask if it is a common one in America?"

"I know of no family but my own that bears it, there," I answered.

He sat down and motioned for us to do likewise.

"I am interested," said he. "Has your family been long in America?"

"Since the year 1777."

He leaned a bit forward. "That was during your Revolutionary War."

"Yes, Your Majesty. It was that year Lafayette joined Washington's Army." That will give him a surprise, I thought.

It did.

"Do you know the name of the Dalberg of 1777?" he asked quickly.

I saw no profit in evasion. "He was Hugo, second son of Henry the Third of Valeria," I replied.

"I knew it," he exclaimed, jumping up and coming over to me. "And you are?"

"His great-grandson and eldest male heir."

"Then, as such, I salute you, cousin," he said, and suddenly kissed me on the cheek.

Were you ever kissed by a man? If so, and you are a woman, it doubtless was pleasant enough, and,

maybe, not unusual; but if you are a man, it will surprise you mightily the first time.

Of course, I understood all the significance of Frederick's action. Royalty on the Continent so greets only royalty or relatives. It meant I was accepted as one of the Blood and a Prince of my House. I admit my pride was stirred.

"Your Majesty overwhelms me," I said, bowing again. "I expected no recognition. I am entitled to none. Our name was stricken from the Family Roll."

He made a deprecating gesture. "Don't let that disturb you, cousin."

"And believe me, also, I had no intention to disclose my relationship," I protested.

The King laughed. "You could not hide it with that face," he said.

I must have flushed, for he exclaimed: "Ha! You know that, do you?"

For answer I drew out the miniature of old Henry, which I had brought hoping for an opportunity to compare it with the original, and handed it to him.

He gave it a quick glance and nodded. "Yes, that went with Hugo," he said.

I was surprised and looked it.

"Oh, the family records are very complete as to the affair of your headstrong ancestor," he explained. "Old Henry himself set it all out in his journal; and he speaks of this very miniature

as having been given to Hugo by his mother, the day he left Dornlitz. There were two of them, copied from the portrait in the Corridor." He crossed to a cabinet. "And here is the other one," he said.

I glanced at Courtney. He threw up his hands in defeat; at the same time, however, signifying that I should press my advantage while the King was so well disposed.

But I shook my head. My descent had been acknowledged, and that was quite enough—more than enough, indeed. I had come to Valeria as a Major in the American Army. I sought no favors from the Dalbergs here. From which it would seem that a bit of Hugo's stubborn independence had come down to me. As for Courtney, the shrug of his shoulders was very eloquent of what he thought of such independence.

"Perchance you never heard of a certain letter dispatched to Hugo by his brother, Frederick, after Henry's death?" the King asked.

"And delivered by his Ambassador," I supplemented.

"The same. Hugo, too, seems to have kept a journal."

"He kept the letter itself, and a copy of his answer," I added.

The King laughed. "Altogether, Hugo must have been a rare fine fellow, with a mind of his own."

"He was a son of Henry the Third," I answered.

The King nodded. "Yet 'twas a pity he did not accept Frederick's offer."

"I fancy the new life was more to his mind."

"Doubtless,—but, had he returned, it would be you and not Ferdinand of Lotzen who would be the Heir Presumptive of Valeria."

I smiled. "Had he returned I would not be I."

"True enough," said he. "But think of the crown of your ancestors that might be yours."

"It is enough to be a Dalberg. I have never thought of the crown," I answered.

"There spoke the son of Hugo," he said.

Then, suddenly, he seemed to remember that we were not alone, and, springing up, he sought out Courtney, who, though unable to get out of ear-shot, had courteously retired to the remotest corner of the room.

"My dear Courtney," he exclaimed. "I have been unpardonably rude. I forgot you completely. Yet, you brought it on yourself; you should have prepared me for my cousin."

But Courtney had his part to play. He must keep the American Ambassador free from fault.

"Major Dalberg never disclosed his relationship to your Majesty," he said, formally; "else, as you are well aware, he could not have been given the detail without your express permission. As it is, I shall be obliged to report the matter to my Government and——"

"Do so, by all means, if it will keep your records clear," the King cut in, in the same formal tone; "but be careful, at the same time, to say to your State Department that we shall deem it a personal affront if our Kinsman be recalled. And, now, sir," he went on with an amused smile and dropping the conventional air, "confess it. Didn't you suspect the relationship?"

"I have been a guest at the Court of Valeria too often not to have noted a certain resemblance," Courtney admitted readily. Then, like a good fellow, he set me right. "But, be assured, Your Majesty, not I nor I believe anyone, has ever heard Major Dalberg speak of his royal descent; though I admit I have tried hard to draw him to it."

The King looked at me and nodded in approval.

"It is a law of the family, laid down by Hugo himself," I explained. "Though, of course, our silence does not prevent anyone from proving the fact who investigates our genealogy," and I glanced significantly at Courtney.

This time it was he who doubled his fist at me.

Then a door behind me opened and I heard the trail of a gown—whose, it was easy to guess. Only one woman could have the privilege of entering the King's presence unbidden.

As Courtney and I arose and stepped back, the Princess halted uncertainly.

"Come, Dehra," said the King. "You know the American Ambassador."

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Courtney bowed, but the Princess held out her hand, saying cordially:

"We are glad to welcome Mr. Courtney here as a resident."

Courtney made some fitting reply,—there was always one on the end of his tongue. And then the King turned to me.

"Major Dalberg," he said, "salute your cousin."

I do not know which cousin was the more startled, but I am quite sure which was the more embarrassed. In truth, for a moment, I was too confused to move. The one thought that kept pounding through my brain was: "What am I expected to do?" Frederick had saluted me with a kiss; was it possible he meant me to kiss Dehra! I glanced across at Courtney,—he was struggling to suppress his merriment,—then back at the Princess; and caught what I was fool enough to imagine was a look of glad surprise. She had recognized and remembered me.

That settled it. I stepped forward and deliberately kissed her on the cheek.

The next instant my mouth stung with the blow of an open hand, and I was looking down into the flashing eyes and flaming face of the Princess.

It was quite evident I had not been expected to kiss her.

"Sir!" she exclaimed. "Sir!" And with each word she seemed to strike me afresh. Then words failed her, and with another gesture of disdain she gave me her back.

"Your Majesty, who is this——?" she began.

Then she stopped and I heard her catch her breath. The next moment, with high-held head she swept by me and from the room. And with her going crumbled all the bright castles I had builded on the memories of that ride in the forest, six years before.

Of course I had been a silly fool. The fiend himself must have possessed me. But I had kissed her, and that was something to remember,—though, doubtless, that itself but proved me the greater idiot. All this and much more whirled through my mind in the moment of the Princess's leaving; then I turned, expecting to face the scorn of the King,—and found him wiping the tears from his eyes and shaking with laughter.

So this was what had sent Dehra from the room in anger. And, straightway, the skies brightened. Plainly, if her father were not offended, I might yet make my peace with her.

Then I, too, began to smile. Doubtless there was a funny side to it; though it seemed to be more evident to the spectators than to me. At any rate, the King still laughed, and so did Courtney; though quietly and discreetly. His, I admit, I did not relish; so I spoke.

"I am very sorry, Your Majesty; I meant no offence——" I began.

"Nonsense, Major," the King interrupted. "You gave none."

"Indeed!" I said, and rubbed my mouth.

"Oh, don't hold that against the Princess," he chuckled.

"She didn't hit half hard enough," I said. "She should have knocked me down."

He shook his head. "She misunderstood the whole matter. I forgot she, doubtless, knows nothing of the American branch of the House; so, my calling you cousin conveyed no meaning, if indeed she even heard it. She simply thought you a presumptuous stranger."

"And so I am."

He waved the idea aside. "You are her nearest male relative after myself."

"That may mitigate my presumption—but, none the less, I'm a stranger."

"No Dalberg is stranger to a Dalberg, and least of all in the presence of the Dalberg King," he said. Then the smile came again. "But, by the Lord, sir, I admire your pluck—to kiss the Princess Royal of Valeria before her father's very face."

"It wasn't pluck," I protested. "It was rank ignorance. I was at a loss what greeting was proper;" and I explained my perplexity.

"Of course," he said kindly, but with a shrewd twinkle in his blue eyes, "I understand. Only, I fancy it would be wiser that I make your excuses to your cousin. For, believe me, my dear Major, for one in such doubt you kissed her with amazing promptness."

This time Courtney laughed aloud and the King and I joined him.

"Then you think I may venture, sometime, to speak to her without renewed offence?" I asked presently, as we were about to retire.

"Assuredly," said the King. "When you meet her again to-night act as though you had known her always. I'll answer for it, she will not respond with a blow."

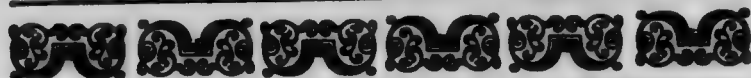
Just at the door he called to me.

"Major," he said, "which would be your preference: to be introduced to-night as one of the Blood, or to hold off a while and continue your duties as American Attaché?"

I had had this very matter in my mind a moment before. "With Your Majesty's permission I will execute my orders—at least, for the present," I said.

"I think that were the proper course under the circumstances. Meanwhile, we will provide that you have the entrée, and as many prerogatives of your birth as are properly consistent with conditions."

Without, a chamberlain awaited to conduct us to the Hall of the Kings, where the birthday ball was to be held.



V

THE SALUTE OF A FRIEND

ONE Court function is pretty much like another, Europe over. There is the same sparkle of jewels and shimmer of silk on aristocratic woman; the same clank of spur and rattle of sword and brilliancy of uniform on official man.

Courtney had long ago become familiar with it all, and I in my details and travels had seen enough to make me indifferently easy, at least. We had tarried overtime with the King, and, so, were the last to reach the Hall. At the door Cosgrove joined us and under his guidance we made our way to the diplomatic line. Scarcely were we there when His Majesty and the Princess Royal were announced and between the ranks of bowing guests they passed to the throne. As Frederick stepped upon the dais there arose spontaneously the shout, thrice repeated:

"Long live the King!"

And then someone cried:—

"Long live Dalberg!" And the throng joined in it twice again.

How the King acknowledged it I do not know.

My whole attention was given to the Princess. It was my first good view of her since the day I had acted as substitute groom. For the bad few minutes lately passed had been given over to labial and mental sensations to the exclusion of the ocular. Now I had more leisure while those ranking and senior to Courtney made their felicitations upon the royal birthday.

She was little changed from my lady of the forest; only a bit more roundness to the figure and maturity in the face, particularly about the set of the mouth when in repose. Otherwise, she was the same charming woman who had smiled me into subjection six years before. Beautiful? Of course; but do not ask me for description, other than that she was medium in height, willowy in figure and dark blonde in type. With that outline your imagination must fill in the rest. Words only caricature a glorious woman.

When it came our turn, the King seemed to make it a point to greet me with marked cordiality; not waiting for my name to be announced, but stepping over to the edge of the dais to meet me and holding me in conversation an unusual time. It was noticed to the Court that I had the royal favor.

Then, with the quiet aside: "It's all explained," he passed me over to the Princess.

She was talking with Courtney, and turned and met me with a smile.

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"Let us shake hands and be friends, cousin," she said.

The graciousness of the gesture was plain enough to the whole room, but the words reached only Courtney and me.

"I don't deserve it—cousin," I said; but I took her hand, none the less.

Then, after a word more, we gave place to those that followed us. But, as I bowed away, she said low : "The sixth dance, cousin."

And so I knew my peace was made.

I looked for some banter from Courtney, but there was none; only a bit of a smile under the grey moustache. What he said was:

"Come, let us circle the room and see whom we know."

"We know none, if I'm to do the knowing," I said.

"Queer state of affairs," he reflected; "the true Heir Presumptive, yet a stranger in the Court."

"Oh! drop that nonsense," I said.

His hand went up to his imperial. "Nonsense? Well, maybe so,—and there's the pity of it."

I laughed. "My dear fellow," I said, "you are becoming sentimental, and without even the excuse of a pretty woman in the case."

He faced toward the throne. "You don't act like a blind man," he said.

"I can see the Princess very clearly, but only with Major Dalberg's eyes," I replied.

"But if you were proclaimed the——"

I cut him short. "I am too old for rainbow-chasing, and Spanish Castles don't become an ambassador."

"There you are wrong, my dear Major; diplomacy deals in *châteaux en Espagne*. It has builded many upon weaker foundations than this one, that have, in time, become substantial and lasting."

"Then, it's a good thing that we army fellows are called upon, occasionally, to tumble a few of them about your diplomatic ears."

He laughed. "You poor military men don't know it's only the phantom castles you tumble. We never give you a chance at any others."

"So I've been a Don Quixote all these years and didn't know it?"

"About that!"

"And that warrants you in sending me to tilt against this foolish heir-presumptive windmill."

"But if it were to prove no windmill?"

"Surely," I said—"Surely, you are not serious?"

He gave me one of his quick glances and his hand went back to his chin.

"*¿Quién sabe?*" as the Spaniard would say, Major; "*¿Quién sabe?*" he replied.

"Don't be an ass, Courtney," I exclaimed. "And don't play me for one, either."

A lift of the eyebrows was his answer—but Courtney could say much that way.

"It's not a bad sort of occupation—being a King," he reflected.

I ignored him.

"And you could fill the place quite as well as Ferdinand of Lotzen," he went on.

"You will be offering presently to wager that I'll be the next King of Valeria," I scoffed.

"With the proper odds, I'd risk it."

"Name them."

"No—not yet," he said; "but I'll go you five thousand even, now, that you marry the Princess Royal."

"This court atmosphere seems to go to your head."

"That has nothing to do with the wager," he insisted.

"I'll not take you," I said. "The last fool bet is enough for me."

"I thought I heard someone say: 'The sixth dance, cousin.'"

"You did."

"And you call that a 'fool bet'?"

"I do,—and the more so that we were sober when we made it."

"You're a bit hard to please, lately," he mocked.

"I'm a bit easily led astray, lately," you mean I retorted.

All this talk, as we made our way through the crowd, was interrupted at intervals while Courtney greeted those he knew and presented me. They were mainly of the diplomatic corps and, if they

noted the coincidence of my name and Dalberg features, they were adepts enough not to show it. Not so, however, with some of the elderly Valerian dignitaries and army officers; they were very evidently surprised and curious, —and, very shortly, it was plain I was the object of their discussion and careful observation.

"How do you enjoy it?" Courtney inquired.

"You forget that this is not my first visit to Dornlitz," I answered.

"Some day I'd like to know of those other visits."

"There's nothing to know; they were like any other tourist's."

"Really, Major, you throw your opportunities away," he said, and I saw he did not believe me.

"What opportunities?" I asked.

He smiled. "Well, not those for prevarication, certainly."

"Isn't that a necessary qualification of a diplomatic attaché?" I said.

"Quite the most important,—and I don't doubt you will find it useful before you leave Valeria."

Then the band blared out into a waltz and the crowd drew away from the centre of the floor. I expected the real Heir Presumptive to lead out the Princess. I admit I was curious to see him. Report made him a very able young fellow, and his pictures showed a goodly figure. Instead, however, someone in a Colonel's uniform was her partner to open the dance. I turned to Courtney interrogatingly.

"It is Prince Charles, Lotsen's brother," he explained.

"And the Duke?" I asked.

"Still with the Army, I suppose."

Then the Princess swung by and, catching my eye, gave me a quick smile.

"Sort of a relief, isn't it?" Courtney remarked.

I nodded mechanically.

"Only I wouldn't tell her so," he said.

"Wouldn't tell her what?" I demanded.

"That you were relieved to know she could dance."

"I never doubted it," I said shortly.

He looked surprised. "Oh!" he remarked; "Oh!"—and fell to stroking his imperial.

"Courtney," said I, "you're a great fool—and I'm another."

"True, Major, quite true; I found that out long ago."

My irritation went down before his unfailing good nature. It was always so.

"Since we are unanimous on that point," I said, "I have no ground for quarrel."

I danced the next number with Lady Helen, the youngest daughter of Lord Radnor, the British Ambassador. We were old friends, after the modern fashion. I had met her in Washington some four or five years before, while on staff duty, and we had danced and dined ourselves into each other's regard. Then, Lord Radnor was transferred to Dornitz and I went back into active service. So I had been

altogether well pleased to find her with the Radnors when we chanced upon them during the stroll around the room, and I had engaged a pair of dances to give us a chance for a quiet little chat.

"Do you know, Major, for a stranger you are arousing extraordinary curiosity?" she remarked, as we sat on the terrace.

I smiled. "Yes, I believe I am."

She looked surprised. "So you have heard of it?"

"I knew it years ago."

"Oh, how stupid!" she exclaimed. "Of course, this is not your first visit to Dornlitz. Yet, it's a queer coincidence that you should have both the family name and the great Henry's features."

"Oh, no," said I; "not particularly queer, since I am his great-great-grandson."

She closed her fan with a snap. "His great-great-grandson!" she echoed.

I nodded.

"But I thought yours an old American family. Didn't you tell me, one day at Mount Vernon, that a Dalberg fought with Washington?"

It was my turn to be surprised. I had long forgotten both the circumstance and the remark.

"And I told you truly enough," I answered.

She frowned a bit; then shook her head. "I cannot understand," she said.

Doubtless I was foolish—Courtney would have called it something stranger—but, nevertheless, I told her the story of Hugo. For the benefit of the

scoffer let me say that the Lady Helen could be very fetching when she was so minded, and this was our first meeting in four years.

"How romantic!" she exclaimed, when I had finished my tale. "Father will be so interested."

I almost tumbled out of the chair. "Lord Radnor will not have the opportunity to be interested," I said sharply. "You may not tell him, nor anyone."

"Certainly not, if you wish it," she said instantly.

I thought she could be trusted; but it would do no harm to give her a bit of warning as to the situation.

"None but the King, the Princess and Courtney knows of this relationship," I said.

She regarded me with an amused smile. "Which means, if it become known, I alone could be the tattler."

There was no need to press the point further.

"It is His Majesty's secret as well as mine," I said, as if in explanation.

She shrugged her pretty shoulders. "I shall keep it because it's—yours," she answered.

There was no doubt Lady Helen could be fetching when she was so minded.

I took her hand and kissed it. Then I glanced around for onlookers.

Lady Helen laughed softly. "You men always do that," she said.

"Oh!" said I.

"You look only after it's all over."

"Oh!" said I, again.

"At least, so I have observed," she admitted, frankly.

"You mean such has been your experience?"

"Well," said she, with a mischievous gleam in her grey eyes, "wasn't it so just now?"

I got up and looked carefully around. No one was very near and we were in the shadow. I leaned over and quickly kissed her on the cheek.

"It wasn't so that time," I said.

She sat perfectly quiet for a bit.

"Let us hope," she said, at length; "let us hope that your eyes were trustworthy. Otherwise——"

"Yes?" I questioned.

"Otherwise our engagement must be announced or——"

"Yes?"

"You must give me the chance to cut you publicly, after which you must leave Dornlitz."

Here was a mess, sure enough. Yet, I was in for it—as most fools usually are.

"Which shall it be?" I said gayly.

She leaned close and looked me in the eyes. And beside her winsome face I saw, in my mind's eye, the Princess's, too—but only for an instant. Then I took her hand again. She smiled sweetly, almost as sweetly as Dehra herself could do.

"Let us wait until we know if we were seen," she said.

I made a move to kiss her again, but she drew away

"Not so, sir; that time you did not look," she said, and stepped out into the light. Then I took her back to Lady Radnor.

"Don't be disconsolate, Major," she said, as we parted. "No one saw you—on the terrace."

I looked down at her gravely. "I am beginning to hope someone did," I said.

She shot a quick glance at me over her fan. "Are you tired of Dornlitz so soon?" she asked.

"I think I want to stay in Dornlitz," I answered.

"But the alternative, Major, the alternative."

"That is why I want to stay."

She smiled. "You did that very prettily," she said. "I shall forgive you the—the kiss."

"But if someone saw it?" I protested.

"You great stupid," she exclaimed, "no one did. Do you think I didn't look?"

"Oh!" said I. "Oh!"

"Sometimes you men are very foolish," she sympathized.

I looked at her a bit in silence. "You have changed since America," I remarked.

"For the better?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"That's not nice of you," she said.

Then Courtney came up.

"Run along, Major," he ordered; "you've kept the Lady Helen over time."

She took his arm. "Please take me out on the terrace," she said. Then she smiled at me aggravatingly.

"Maybe our chairs are still vacant; better take Courtney to them," I said maliciously.

It was not quite fair, possibly; and she told me so with her eyes, though her lips smiled. I knew I had given her another score to settle.



VI

THE SIXTH DANCE

It was Colonel Bernheim who brought me the Princess's commands for the dance; and the courteous way he did his office made me like him on the instant. And this, though there was a certain deference of manner that was rather suggestive.

The Princess was in the small room behind the throne and, when I was announced, beckoned me to her.

"Major Dalberg," said she, when I had made my bow, "I have ordered the band to play an American quickstep; will you dance it with me as it is done at your great school—West Point, is it not?"

It was done very neatly, indeed. No one of those present could have imagined there was any prior arrangement as to that particular dance. I saw the King smile approvingly.

"Your Royal Highness honors my country and its army, but through a very unworthy representative, I fear," I said, as I gave her my arm. Then the music began.

I have very little recollection of that dance; but I

do know that Dehra needed no instruction in our way of doing the two-step; she glided through it as naturally as a Point-girl herself. And, when I told her so, she shrugged her pretty shoulders and answered:

"You are not the first American attaché, you know."

"Nor the last, either," I replied, and then held my peace, though I saw her hide a smile behind her roses.

"But you are the first that has been my cousin," she said sweetly,—and I succumbed, of course. Yet I was punished promptly, nevertheless, for at the throne she stopped and I led her back to the King.

"May I not have another dance later?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Don't you think you have been already favored more than you deserve, cousin?"

"Yes," said I, "I do; that's why I am encouraged to ask for more."

"What a paragon of modesty!" she mocked.

I passed it by. "And the dance?" I asked.

"I shall dance no more to-night," she said. Then we reached the door and found the small room crowded with officials and dignitaries. The Princess halted sharply. "But you may take me for a turn on the terrace," she concluded.

As we crossed the wide floor the crowd fell back,—but Dehra gave no greeting to anyone, though she

must have known all eyes were upon us. Yet, to give her due credit, she seemed as unconscious of it as if we were alone in the room. As for me, I admit I was acutely conscious of it, and the walk to the door seemed endless. I must have shown my relief when it was over, for the Princess looked up with a smile.

"That's your first trial as one of the Blood," she said.

"There are compensations," I answered.

She ignored the point. "They are very few."

"Sometimes, one would be ample."

Again she evaded. "Yes, the privilege to be as free as the lowest subject," she answered, instantly.

"Pure theory," I said. "The lowest subject would think you mad."

"I would gladly exchange places," she said.

"Don't make any of them the offer."

"No—out of regard for my Father I won't."

"It's a great thing to be a Princess Royal," I ventured.

"Oh, I dare say—to those who care for great things."

"Who do not?"

"I don't. At least I think I don't."

"You would think so only until you were not the Princess Royal."

"That may be; but, as I am the Princess Royal and cannot well change my birthright, I don't see how I am to get the chance to think otherwise."

"It's better to think you do not like great things when you have them, than to like them and not have them."

"You make it only a choice of unhappinesses," she said.

"I make it only life."

"You are too young to be pessimistic," she said.

"And you are too fortunate in life to be unhappy," I answered.

"But you said life was but a choice of unhappinesses."

"Only to the discontented."

"Oh!" said she. "Instead of a pessimist you are a philosopher."

"I sincerely trust I'm neither."

"So do I, cousin," she laughed, "if we are to be friends. I don't like philosophers; which is natural, doubtless; and as a pessimist I prefer no rival."

"Which is also natural," I added. "And I promise not to interfere with your prerogative nor do the Socrates act again."

"*Entre nous*, I think you're wise; neither becomes you particularly."

I laughed. "You're frank."

"It's the privilege of cousins," she replied.

"Oh!" said I. "I'm glad you think so."

"That is—in matters strictly cousinly," she added quickly.

"I shall remember," I said.

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She gave me a quick glance. "Can you remember several years back?" she said.

(So, she had recognized me.)

"That depends," said I. "I have a bad memory except for pleasant things."

"Then I am quite sure you will remember," she laughed, and fell to picking a rose apart, petal by petal.

"I am ready to remember anything," I said, catching one of the petals.

"Oh! But maybe I don't want you to remember."

"Then I'm ready——"

She looked at me quickly. "To forget?" she interrupted.

"To remember only what you wish." I ended.

"That means you will remember nothing until I wish it?"

I caught the half-plucked rose as she let it fall.

"It means my memory is at your command," I said.

She drew out another rose and dropped it deliberately.

"I am very awkward," she said, as I bent for it.

"On the contrary, I thought you did it very prettily," I answered.

She laughed. "Then you may keep it instead of the torn one."

"I shall keep both.

"Always?" she mocked.

"At least until I leave you."

"Thank Heaven, cousin, for once in my life I have had an honest answer!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand.

I took it. I did not kiss it, though that may seem strange. Sometimes, I do have the proper sense of the fitness of things.

"It's the privilege of cousins to be frank," I quoted.

"Have you always been frank with me?" She asked.

"Rather too much so, I fear."

She gave me a sharp look. "Do you know a Captain Smith of your Army?"

"Smith is a very common name in America. I know at least a dozen who are officers."

"John Smith is his name. He was a Captain, six years ago."

I appeared to think a moment. "I know two such—one in the Cavalry, the other in the Engineers."

"Describe them, please."

I showed surprise. "Does Your Royal Highness —?"

She cut in. "That is just what she is trying to find out."

"Yes?"

"Whether either of them is the Captain Smith I have in mind."

"Both would be much honored."

"I am not so sure as to the one I mean. He was a very conceited fellow."

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I gritted back a smile. "It must have been the Engineer," I said. "He's a good deal of a prig."

She bent over the roses. "Oh, I wouldn't call him just that."

"It's no more than I've heard him call himself," I said.

"You must know him rather intimately."

"On the contrary, I know him very slightly, though I've been thrown with him considerably."

"Are you not friendly?" she asked.

"We have had differences."

Again the roses did duty. "I fear you are prejudiced," she said, and I thought I caught a smothered laugh.

"Not at all," I insisted. "I am disposed in his favor."

"So I should judge."

I could not decide which way she meant it. "Oh, he is not all bad," I condescended. "In many ways he is a good sort of chap."

"Now, that's better," she rejoined; "to say for him what he could not, of course, say for himself."

I forced back another laugh. "Oh, I don't know why he should not have said that to a friend," said I.

"It would depend much on the friend."

I did not know if she had given the opening, deliberately, but I took it.

"Of course, he would say that only to one he felt could understand him."

"You are painting him rather better than you did at first," she observed.

"I'm warming up to the subject."

"Then suppose you tell me what he looks like."

"That," said I, "is to tell his greatest fault."

"I do not understand."

"He looks like me," I explained.

"How horrible," she laughed.

"He has never ceased to deplore it," I said humbly.

"Surely, he never told you."

"To my face, many times."

"You had good cause for differences, then."

"Thank you, cousin," I said.

"And, may I ask," she went on, "what you did to him at such times?"

I shook my head. "It would not tell well."

"No, possibly not; but tell me, anyway," she said.

"Sometimes, I put him to bed—and, sometimes, I bought him a superabundance of red liquor."

"Don't tell me the other times," she interposed.

"No," said I, "I won't."

She fell to plucking the roses again.

"This Captain Smith," she said presently; "was he in Valeria six years ago?"

"That would be in 189—?" I reflected a moment.

"Yes he was here that year."

She thought a bit. "Was he given to reminiscing?"

"No one in America but myself knew he had been to Valeria."

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She smiled.

I saw the blunder. "It happened he knew of my Dalberg descent," I hastened to add.

"Has he ever mentioned an adventure in the forest near the Summer Palace?"

"I am quite sure he has not," I said, but without looking at her.

Then I felt a touch on my arm—and I took her gloved fingers in my own and held them.

"You are very good, cousin," she said, then loosed her hand.

"When did you recognize me?" I asked.

"When you kissed me. That was why I was so angry."

"I noticed you were annoyed."

"Yet, I was more disappointed."

"Yes?" I inflected.

"To have my ideal Captain Smith shattered so completely."

"But when you learned it was your cousin?"

"That saved the ideal."

"But I cannot live up to the Captain."

She shook her head. "There is no need. The Captain is dead. It is my cousin Armand now."

"But every woman has her ideal," I ventured.

"Yes, I shall have to find a new one."

"Then it's only exit the Captain to enter a stranger," I said.

"Not necessarily a stranger," she returned.

"To be sure," I agreed; "there is His Royal Highness, the Duke of Lotsen."

"Or Casimir of Titia," she added, drawing down her mouth. "Or even my new-found cousin Armand."

"He died with the Captain," I laughed.

"No, the Captain died with him."

"I think, as a matter of proper precaution, it would be well to go in," I said.

"Are you tired of me, so soon?"

"You know very well it's because I'm fearful of disgracing the Captain again."

"Please don't," she said smilingly, "here comes a friend of yours."

It was Courtney with Lady Helen on his arm.

"Two friends of mine," I said, as they passed.

"You know Lady Helen Radnor?"

"After a fashion. I was stationed in Washington while Lord Radnor was Ambassador there."

"You two would suit each other."

"Yes?"

"You both are—shall I say it—flirts."

I began to disclaim.

"Nonsense!" she cut in. "Don't you think a woman knows another woman—and also a man?"

"By your leave, cousin, I'll not think," I said.

"It's a bit unnecessary sometimes," she laughed.

I made no reply. In truth, I knew none. But the Princess did not seem to notice it. She was plucking at the roses again.

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"I wish I might flirt," she broke out suddenly.

I grasped the marble rail for support.

"Don't look so surprised," she laughed, "I'll not try it—I know what is permitted me."

"Then you never flirted?" I asked with assumed seriousness.

"No; that's another penalty of birth. With whom may the Princess Royal flirt?"

I waved my hand toward the ball room.

"I hope I am neither cruel nor indiscreet," she said, rather curtly.

"But there are many royal guests come to Dornlitz," I ventured.

She shrugged her shoulders. "They all bore me."

"Which only makes them the better material to practice on."

"Surely, I am very innocent," she said. "I thought at least a bit of sentiment was required."

"Sentiment only endangers the game," I explained.

"But suppose the sentiment were to come suddenly—in the midst of the 'game,' as you call it?"

"Then," said I, "there is rare trouble ahead for the other party."

"But if that one also were to become—you know," she went on.

"There's an end to the flirtation; it's a different kind of game then."

"Are you quite sure there can be flirtation without sentiment?" she persisted.

"It's the only artistic sort; and the only safe sort, too," I answered sagely.

"And is it a pleasant game to play for a while in that fashion?" she asked.

"Doubtless," I answered evasively; "only it is rarely done."

She went back to the roses again. "I think, cousin, I shall flirt with you," she said suddenly.

I took a fresh hold on the railing. I was surprised.

But I was more troubled; for I was quite sure she meant it.

"Don't you think, Princess, you are putting me to a heavy test?" I objected. "I may cease to be artistic."

"You said it could be done."

"Yes, as a general——"

"Then your test is no heavier than mine," she interrupted.

I bowed. So, this was her punishment for the kiss of salutation.

"But if I were to fail to carry the game through properly?" I said.

She hesitated. "I may fail, too," she said.

"And then?" I asked.

She looked away. "It would make no difference in the ending. You would go away; and I—would make some crazy marriage of political expediency."

I straightened up. Maybe she had not been maliciously leading me out. Maybe she was simply

unhappy and wanting a new sensation. Then, suddenly, she put her hand on my arm.

"Come, Armand," she said; "take me back to the King. We have flirted enough for one evening."

"We?" I said wonderingly.

She took a rose from her gown—and drew it through my sword belt.

"Yes," she said; and gave me one of those bewildering smiles. "Wouldn't you call it that? At least, you have taught me to-night all I know of the game."

"And how about six years ago, cousin?" I said, securing her hand.

She looked down demurely. "Well, maybe I did learn a little that day," she admitted.



VII

AN EARLY MORNING RIDE

THE second morning after the ball I arose early—in fact, just as the bugles of the garrison were sounding reveille—and went for a horseback ride into the country. Though I knew about all the roads in the vicinity, I confess it never occurred to me to take any but that which led toward the Summer Palace and the place where I had first met the Princess.

It may be some will scoff at this, but I venture that by far the majority will deem it only natural. For myself I may further admit that I ordered my horse the night before for no other purpose; and I have no excuse to offer. From all of which it may be inferred that I, at least, was scarcely likely to be artistic long in a certain flirtation.

I had thought it all over during the last thirty-six hours, and, as I jogged through the streets, I went over with it again—and always with the same result: I would enjoy it while it lasted. Afterward—well, afterward would be time enough when it came. So I shrugged my shoulders and returned the salute of the officer at the gate and rode out into the open country.

I had gone, possibly, a mile when there came the beat of running hoofs behind me and rapidly nearing. Thinking it might be a messenger from the Embassy I swung around in saddle—only to find the front horse was ridden by a woman and the other by a groom.

My first thought was: "The Princess!" my next: "By Jove, she rides well!" Then something familiar in seat and figure struck me and I recognized Lady Helen Radnor. Evidently she had already made me out, for she waved her crop and pulled down to a canter. Here was an end to my solitary ride; I turned back to meet her.

"Why, Major Dalberg, what luck!" she cried. "One might imagine we were in Washington again."

"What need for Washington," said I, "since we are here?"

"True! It's always the people that make the place," she laughed.

"Then you like Dornlitz as well as Washington?"

"Yes, lately."

"If I were at all conceited I would guess that 'lately' meant——"

"Yes?" she asked.

"But as I'm not conceited I won't guess."

"I'm afraid it's not quite the same, then, as in Washington!"

I made no reply.

"There, you would have been ready to believe I followed you intentionally."

"Did you ever do that?" I asked.

She laughed. "We are quits now."

"Then I may ride with you?"

"Surely—why do you think I overtook you?"

I bowed to my horse's neck. "I am flattered," I said.

"You ought to be, sir."

I looked at her quickly. It was said, it seemed to me, a bit sharply; but she gave me only the usual mocking smile.

"Where shall we go?" I asked.

"You have no choice?"

"None—all roads are alike delightful now. Besides, you forget I came here only two days ago; this is my first ride since then."

"Then, suppose we go out by the Forge and around by the hill road above the Palace?"

"You must be the guide," I replied.

"Come along, then; we turn to the right here."

"Only"—I began.

"Oh! I'll have you back in time for breakfast," she cut in. "That was what you meant?"

"Your Ladyship is a mind reader."

"Nonsense! I'm human enough to have an appetite, too."

"Perhaps there is an inn on the way." I suggested. (There was none six years ago.)

She shook her head. "There's nothing to eat before Dornnitz, if we go that route."

"Some day we must find one that has a breakfast on it," said I.

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"There are several; I know them well," she said.

"Good; and you will take me to them?"

"It will be jolly."

"I am very lucky to have you in Dornlitz," I said gratefully.

She smiled sweetly. "Maybe I'm lucky, too," she said.

It brought me up with a jerk. It was folly to be serious with her—she was only bantering as usual.

"It's none of my affair, of course," I said with assumed sadness, "but I would like to know how many poor devils have gone down before that smile in the last six years."

"You mean?"

"That you're the most consummate coquette I know."

"Is that a compliment?" she asked.

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Upon the way you use your power."

She hesitated a moment. "Have I ever used it improperly to your knowledge?" she asked.

I dodged the question. "You admit the power, then?"

"I admit nothing, except that I do not like to be called a coquette."

I saw she was in earnest here; there was almost a choke in her voice.

"But I would not have you otherwise," I objected.

She shook her head. "You say that only because you think you hurt me."

"Don't you know your bright and happy disposition is a thing beyond price?" I argued.

"I know its price is heavy—I have paid it to you just now—I am paying it every day of my life." There were tears in the voice.

I was at a loss what to say. A man is an awkward comforter at best, and when he is guilty of bringing on the trouble, he is sure only to make a worse mess of it. So I held my tongue and we rode a while in silence.

She spoke first. "I know you are quite justified in your notion of me," she said. "I have given you every reason to call me coquette, flirt, or anything of that sort."

I raised my hand in protest.

"No, let me finish," she went on. "I have only myself to blame for it. I was warned against you before I ever saw you; and, so, I tried to play your own game from the start." (I hope I had the grace to blush; I think I had.) "But the other night, somehow, the game got too fast for me—and I—well, I bungled. But whether you believe me or not, Major Dalberg, I want to say, as a solace to myself, at least, that you are the only man who ever kissed my face."

I have smelled considerable powder in active service, and I think I may say I have a fair amount of courage, but it had all oozed away before the grieving tones and melting eyes of beauty in distress; and in another moment I should have cut and run

like the rankest coward. For, what would you? A handsome woman (none I had ever seen, not even the Princess, surpassed her) almost in tears beside you—and all because of your own clumsy tongue and heavy sense.

I opened my mouth to speak; but the words did not come. In truth, my brain would not act. I was vacant of ideas. And so she waited; while our horses walked with heads together, friendly as old stable chums. Then I found my tongue.

"My dear Lady Helen," I said, "I owe you an apology for what I did that night."

"You owe me nothing," she broke in. "You know perfectly well that when a woman is kissed in that way she has only herself to blame."

"But it takes two to make a bargain," I insisted; "and it was I who did it."

"Tell me," she demanded, "tell me honestly: you didn't imagine I would be angry?—you felt perfectly easy about it at the time?"

I bungled again, of course: I hesitated.

She laughed scornfully. "You have answered me, Major Dalberg."

"No," said I, "I have not. You *were* angry at the instant, though you chose to act otherwise. I thought so, then; I am sure of it now."

A feeble smile touched her lips. "Confess, that you then thought the anger only assumed."

"Didn't you act deliberately to make me think so?"

"After you had kissed me," she said, half defiantly, "what mattered it if I played it on to the end?"

"And you did it beautifully," I agreed.

"So beautifully that you intimated I proposed playing it all over again with your friend Courtney."

"You wrong me there," I objected.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I was annoyed at your going off with him."

She turned and looked me in the eyes. "You might, at least, spare me the discourtesy of flippancy," she said.

"But I am serious, I assure you," I insisted.

She smiled incredulously. "I am so sorry to have bored you, Major Dalberg——"

"But you don't understand——" I protested.

"Please let us drop the subject," she interrupted.

"Don't you think that a pretty view?" and she pointed with her crop to a mite of a lake below us, flashing through the trees.

I hope I did not show in my face how willing I was to change the subject; and I know I tried to keep it out of my voice. But I fear I grew altogether too enthusiastic over the bit of scenery for, presently, Lady Helen remarked dryly:

"One would never imagine you a lover of—nature."

I pulled myself up sharply. "Are my looks so much against me?"

"I don't see that looks have anything to do with

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it. I mean one does not associate such tastes with professional soldiers. Nature, to them, would normally represent only obstacles to overcome or advantages to be utilized."

"But men do not look at everything through their professional eyes," I laughed. "If they did, every lawyer when he saw you would have but the one thought: 'What a glorious plaintiff for a breach of promise case.'"

"I suppose you think that complimentary," she said.

"It was not so intended."

"I trust not."

"I used it only to illustrate the proposition."

"Are you trying to make me quarrel with you?" she demanded.

"Surely not."

"Then let us avoid the personal."

"I will do anything to preserve the peace," I said—"and be shown those other rides."

"The peace depends entirely upon yourself."

"And the rides?"

She studied her gloves a bit. "They depend upon your good behavior and—the future." And now, something of the old sweetness was in her smile.

"Then the rides are sure," I said. "Come, let us give the horses a chance to stretch themselves."

We pulled up at the Old Forge; a smithy long deserted and now almost hidden beneath vines and undergrowth. It lay at the crossways of two roads—

like a log on a saw-buck—and our route was around it to the left. Just beside the track a spring bubbled out into a wide rock basin. At the basin a tall bay horse was drinking; and in the saddle, with hands clasped around the pommel, sat the Princess Dehra, so deep in thought she did not note our approach.

It was the horse who aroused her by the nervous upward fling of his head. Then she held out her hand to Lady Helen—and gave me a smile.

"I am not the only one, then, who likes the early morning?" she said.

"It's the cream of the day," said Lady Helen.

"Rather the champagne of the day," the Princess answered. Then she laughed. "I forgot, Major Dalberg, it isn't well to take champagne before breakfast."

"I prefer coffee, I admit," said I.

"Are you two going anywhere in particular?" she asked.

"Straight back to town," said Lady Helen; "don't you see Major Dalberg wants his breakfast?"

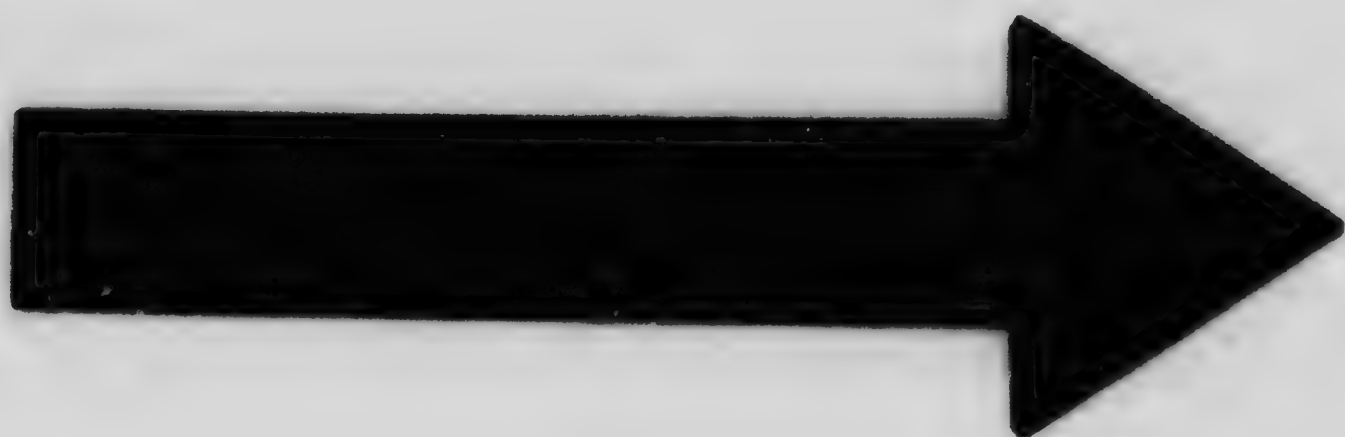
"And your Ladyship?" the Princess questioned.

Lady Helen laughed. "I am very human, too, I fear."

"Then, why not breakfast with me at the Summer Palace?" said Dehra.

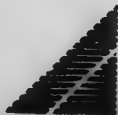
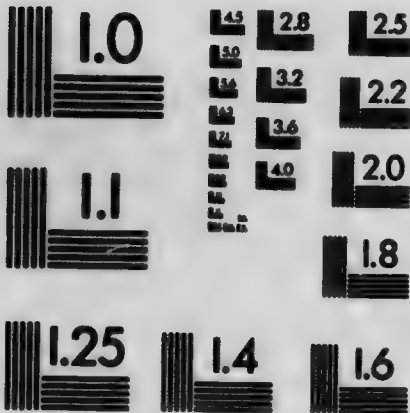
"We shall be delighted," said Lady Helen, without even questioning me by a glance.

"Your Royal Highness is too gracious," I protested. "I fear I shall——"



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Dehra raised her crop. "There is only one shall, sir; you shall come with us."

So I went; even while my better judgment bade me turn bridle and gallop away. A man is very helpless with one pretty woman; he is utterly at the mercy of two.

Presently we passed the place where the Princess and I had met six years before. I glanced across and found her eyes on me. I nodded toward the spot where I had removed the stone from the mare's hoof, and she nodded back in answer.

"This is a very charming road," I said.

"It's a favorite with Your Highness, is it not?" asked Lady Helen. "I have often met you on it."

I affected to be interested in something beside the track.

"Yes, I believe it is," Dehra answered carelessly. "It is soft for the horse and little travelled and I enjoy the quiet of the forest." Then she deliberately turned and smiled at me. And Lady Helen saw it.

At the top of the hill above the Palace the way narrowed and I fell behind; and, dismounting, I affected to be fixing something about the girth. I wanted to see the Princess go down that tree-lined way as once before I had seen her. Then they came to the bend; and, leaning against my horse's shoulder, I waited. Would she remember?

Suddenly, she turned and waved her hand, exactly as she had done that other time; only, this time, it

was a beckon to follow, not a farewell. I sprang to saddle and dashed ahead, almost fearing to find her vanished and it only a dream. When I rounded the corner, the Princess and Lady Helen were turning into the drive that led from the road to the Palace; and, once again, Dehra waved me onward.

They awaited me at the gate; and, with the guard standing at attention, we rode into the grounds. I noticed that the Princess acknowledged the salute with her crop as though it were a sword. I had returned it with my hand.

"Your way is the correct one," she said.

"But yours is much the prettier," I answered.

"Maybe that's why I used it," she laughed.

"It is sufficient justification," I assured her.

"His Majesty does not think so—he insists that the Colonel of the Blue Guards should conform to the regulations."

"I salute my superior officer," I said, and used my crop as she had done.

"How delightful to be a Colonel," said Lady Helen. "I would wear the uniform all the time—if it were becoming."

"How could it be otherwise?" I exclaimed.

"No sarcasm, sir," she said sharply.

"No, Major Dalberg, no sarcasm," Dehra cautioned, "or you will be asking, presently, if I won my commission on the field of battle."

"I would rather not imagine you on the field of battle," I answered.

"Well, you needn't," she laughed. "It's an infliction of birth. It belongs to the eldest child of the King without regard to sex."

"It's a pity, in your case, the crown does not follow the Colonelcy," I thought—but I did not say it.

At one of the private entrances we drew up. The Princess was out of saddle as quickly as myself; but the Lady Helen waited.

"If you don't want to stay I can contrive some excuse," she whispered, as I lifted her down.

"I'm quite willing to risk a royal breakfast if you are," I answered.

"Brave man," she mocked, gathering up her skirt; "you wouldn't flinch at leading a forlorn hope."

"Watch me follow one," I retorted, as I brought up the rear.

"Which one?" she asked over her shoulder; but I did not answer.

The breakfast was served in a charming little room—which I assumed to be a portion of the Princess' private suite—and was of the sort to provoke more early morning rides along the Old Forge Road.

"This may be a bit unconventional," said Dehra, addressing Lady Helen, rather than me, "but, if the English Ambassador can stand it, I will answer for the King of Valeria."

"And I'll answer for the American Ambassador," I volunteered.

"Then the others don't matter," Lady Helen laughed.

"You surely have relieved us very much, Major Dalberg," the Princess added. "Lady Helen and I have been so concerned for your reputation; you risk so much, you know, in breakfasting alone with two unmarried young women."

"I'm quite sensible of my danger," I answered, and looked blandly from one to the other.

The Princess kept her eyes on her plate; but Lady Helen gazed at me in some surprise.

"If you're not better behaved, sir, I'll take you away at once," she said.

"You're only putting a premium on a continuance of it," said Dehra.

"No, I'm not, Your Highness; he hasn't finished his breakfast."

"You're very wise," the Princess laughed.

Lady Helen shook her head. "You see, I've known Major Dalberg a long time," she said.

"Oh! then you had met before the night of the Ball?"

I looked at Dehra wonderingly. Had she forgotten that I myself had told her, on the terrace, how long I had known the Radnors.

"We were old dinner and cotillon partners in Washington," Lady Helen explained. "He was very kind to me there."

"That wasn't a very difficult task, was it, Major Dalberg?" Dehra asked, fixing her blue eyes on my face.

"Please, Your Highness—please," exclaimed Lady Helen, holding up her hands.

"I think," I replied "that Lady Helen is, in herself, the best answer to Your Highness's question."

Just then there came a step in the corridor and the King stood in the doorway.

"Good morning, Lady Helen," he said, taking her fingers and raising them to his lips in the beautiful old-fashion; "it is a pleasure to see you here again." Then he bent and kissed Dehra on the forehead, and turning to me said, extending his hand: "And, Major Dalberg, you are very welcome."

Frederick was monarch of a powerful nation, but he could, if he so wished, make those about him forget his crown and see only the quiet-mannered gentleman. With a word of excuse to us he drew the Princess aside to a window embrasure. I turned to Lady Helen.

"So," said I, "you've been here before?"

She smiled.

"And this is not your first breakfast with Your Highness?" I went on.

Another smile.

"And, doubtless, you have often met her at the Old Forge?"

Once again a smile.

"And were engaged to meet her there this morning?"

"You are too discerning, Major," she said, with a shrug. "You should have been a detective."

"Quite right," I agreed. "I am always the last to detect a plot or to find the criminal."

She looked at me through half-closed eyes. "Which means?"

I gave her back a look in kind. "Whatever you would."

She toyed with her rings a bit. "Why should I deliberately bring you and the Princess together?" she demanded.

"Why, indeed?" said I.

"You are of the Blood—the Palace is open to you."

I raised my hand sharply in warning.

She glanced over my shoulder, toward the window, with a derisive smile. "True, the Princess might wonder how I knew."

I made no answer.

"And the explanation would be a trifle difficult," she appended.

"Do you think she would ask an explanation?" I inquired.

She smiled. "No; you would have to volunteer it."

"That would be easy," I said indifferently.

"Surely! Surely! it would be easy to tell the Princess Royal that you were so confidential with Lady Helen Radnor, on the terrace at the Birthday Ball, that you told her the secret of your cousinship—try it, Major Dalberg, try it—it will be so easy," and she laughed softly.

"I rather think I shall," said I, looking her in the eye. "I prefer that she hear it from me."

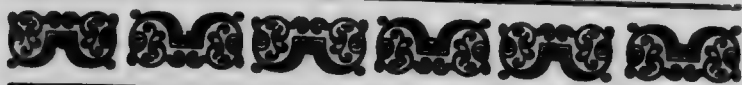
Her mood changed instantly. "You don't trust me?" she said.

I leaned forward and said. "I trust you entirely; surely, you know that!"

"And you will believe I had no appointment to meet the Princess?"

"If you wish it," I said.

Then the King and the Princess returned to the table.



VIII

THE LAWS OF THE DALBERGS

"ARE you in haste to return?" The King asked Lady Helen.

"None whatever, sire," she replied.

"And you, Major Dalberg?" he asked.

"I am at Your Majesty's service," said I, bowing.

"Then, if the ladies will excuse you for a short while?"

"Don't make it too short, sire," said Lady Helen—and then the door closed and saved me a reply; which, doubtless, was as well, for I have not yet thought of a good one.

"Bright girl, that," said the King.

"Yes," said I, "embarrassingly bright at times."

"Was she in Washington with Radnor?"

"Yes; I knew her there."

"Then you don't need to be warned."

I was silent.

"She has incapacitated half my military household with lacerated hearts or, indirectly, with punctured bodies; there is small difference."

"Better have only married officers," I suggested.

"Lord, sir, they are the first victims. Immunes are what I want."

"Like myself, for instance," said I.

He turned and put his hand on my shoulder. "I've had plenty like you, lad," he said kindly.

I laughed. "Then I may not hope for a place at Court?" I asked—and straightway wondered why I had asked it.

We had just come to a small door, before which paced a soldier of the Guard, and the King made no reply until we were in his private library and he had motioned me to a chair and an assortment of pipes and cigars.

"It was something of that sort that I want to discuss with you, if I may," he said.

"If you may?" I echoed.

He nodded. "You are a subject of the United States and a representative of its government at my Court."

"I had forgotten their significance," I admitted.

"But, with your permission, we can lay aside our officialism and hold a family conference."

The idea of my holding a family conference with the King of Valeria! I smiled involuntarily; and Frederick saw it.

"Don't you feel quite at home in the family, yet, my lad?" he asked.

"It is not Your Majesty's fault if I don't," said I; "but royalty is a bit new and strange to me."

He laughed heartily. "You are quite too modest,

Armand. You spoke of a place at Court; would you accept one?"

"Surely, sire, you knew I was only jesting!" I exclaimed.

"Of course," said he; "but I'm not. I am entirely serious."

"I suppose," said I, "I'm as ambitious as most men."

"A little more so, if you're a good Dalberg," the King interjected.

"But am I a good Dalberg?"

He waved his hand toward a mirror in the wall.

"Use your eyes," he said.

"I don't mean physically," I objected.

"I am very willing to trust Nature. She didn't give you old Henry's body and then mock it with inferior abilities."

I shook my head.

"Besides," he went on, "I admit I have had a report on you from my Ambassador at Washington."

"I trust," said I, with a laugh, "it has left me a few shreds of repute."

"It didn't hurt you much, my lad."

That was the third time he had called me his "lad."

"Your Majesty then offers me . . . and a place at Court?"

The King smiled. "Yes," said he, "a high title and a high place."

I pulled on my cigar and tried to think. But, on

every cloud of smoke, I seemed to see the Princess; and all my brain knew was the single idea: "It will bring me within reach of her." I got up sharply and paced the room, until I threw off the foolish notion and could look at the matter in its true proportions.

"Tell me, Your Majesty," I said, "if I accept, will I be regarded as a legitimate descendant of the House of Dalberg or as of a morganatic marriage?"

The King nodded. "I had anticipated that would be your first question. You will be legitimate."

"But," said I, "if I understand the canons of royalty, my great-grandfather having married one not of royal rank his descendants are, as regards the House of Valeria, illegitimate."

"As a general proposition that is true; but it happens that your case is a peculiar exception."

"I am glad," said I; "otherwise we had reached an end of the matter."

"That, Major, is one of your American notions," said the King; "there is no disgrace in morganatic marriages."

"It's all a question of nations' taste," said I; "and you know, sire, '*de gustibus non*'——"

He drummed with his fingers a moment on the table.

"I have some unhandy views, possibly," said I.

"Oh, you will soon outgrow them," he returned; "only, it may be a trifle awkward if you parade them."

"But, maybe, I shall not care to outgrow them."
I objected. "And then, there is another notion—
American, too, doubtless—which I fear will be a
final bar."

"Nonsense, Armand," said the King, a bit
sharply. "What other objection can even an
American raise?"

"This, sire," said I: "When Hugo left Dornlitz
his estates were forfeited, his titles were revoked and
his name was stricken from the family roll. How can
he now, after a century and a quarter, be rehabili-
tated?"

"The King, as Head of our House, has full
power."

"Yes, I know; his power in the family is limitless,
save that he may not change the succession to the
Crown in favor of a female—more's the pity. But,
while Your Majesty may make me a Duke, or even a
Prince, yet that will not give back to Hugo the rights
he was deprived of by his arbitrary father."

The King smiled indulgently. "For an American
you have a large fund of sentiment."

"That is the Dalberg in me, doubtless," I replied.

"Then, sir, I understand that—because your
great-grandfather didn't live for one hundred and
forty years and so be able now to receive, in the
flesh, the edict of restoration—you, his eldest male
heir, refuse to accept your rights; the rights that
come to you through him?"

"No, that's not exactly it; it's this: For Your

Majesty, now, to restore me to the Family Roll, can be done only upon the hypothesis that all of Hugo's descendants have been debruised by the bar sinister—the very act of restoration presupposes such disqualification.”

“You forget I said you were legitimate,” said the King.

“By your grace; not by old Henry's,” I objected.

“But, recall that Hugo himself was offered his titles and rights by his brother and that he declined them.”

“Yes; that is just the point,” said I: “he declined them.”

Frederick took a fresh cigar and lit it carefully, blowing the smoke in tiny rings to the ceiling.

“I think I understand now,” he said. “You will decline our offer because it necessitates the restoration *now*, of Hugo's descendants, to the Family Roll?”

I bowed in silence.

“It's a great pity,” he said, sadly. “Otherwise, if Hugo had, in effect, never been disinherited and if the legitimacy of his descendants had been specifically preserved by Royal Decree, you would accept our offer?”

“Yes,” said I—“or, at least, I would give it serious consideration,” I added with a laugh.

The King turned slowly and, for a space, kept his eyes fixed steadily on my face, as though searching there for an answer to something about which his mind was undecided. Have you ever had a monarch

or one high in authority look at you so? If you have, you are likely to remember it many days.

Then he arose abruptly and, crossing to a large vault built in a far corner, returned with a heavy black box curiously bound with brass and inlaid with silver. Placing it on the table between us, he took from his watch chain a small antique key and pushing it, with a queer side-motion, into the lock, it opened with a sharp snap, and he threw back the lid.

"I wonder," said he, as he lifted out a thick leather-covered book with heavy metal hinges, "if there are many Americans whom it would be so difficult to persuade to accept a royal title?"

"I fancy it would be much the same with all the truly representative old American families," said I.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Then, for the credit of America, it's a pity Europe does not know some of those same old families; if they are the Country's true Nobility."

"Yes, but not Nobility on European lines," said I. "They are the *worthy* descendants of those who founded the Nation; and the proudest patent is a commission from King or Colony or from the Continental Congress in the Revolution."

The King smiled. "Isn't that every Nation's Nobility—the descendants of the officers who helped their chief to establish a kingdom?"

"It may be so," I answered; "but the systems are wide apart. You will observe, I said the *worthy*

descendants. In America it needs manhood as well as birthright—gentle living as well as gentle blood.”

“While with us it needs only gentle blood, you mean?” said Frederick, good naturedly. “Well, we shall not argue over the matter; and, particularly, since the Dalbergs have no fault to find with their representative among the American Nobility; it’s rather he who is ashamed of his Valerian relatives.”

“I am quite satisfied with the two I’ve met,” I protested.

“So well, indeed, with one of them that you kissed her instantly,” the King laughed.

“And am glad, now, I did it. I shall never have another chance.”

He shot a quick glance at me, as he opened the book and began to turn the heavy parchment pages, which I could see were illumined in beautiful colors and with strange, large lettering. Presently, these ended and the characters seemed to be in ancient script, which gradually grew more modern. At one of these later pages, the King stopped and addressed me:

“You have said that, unless Hugo’s rights and the Dalberg legitimacy of his descendants were preserved, by special Decree, made during Hugo’s life, you would decline to return to Court.” He paused a moment, then went on: “It would almost seem that old Henry had some presentiment of a certain stubborn-minded grandchild, for he provided for just such a condition as you have made.

This book is the Laws of the House of Dalberg. Listen to what is written touching Hugo, son of Henry the Third."

Instinctively, I arose and stood at attention. The King read:

"Section one-hundred twenty-first—For inasmuch as our second son, Hugo, hath, in defiance of our specific prohibition, this day left our Kingdom and gone over Sea to the North American Colonies of Great Britain, there to join the forces of one, George Washington, who is leading a revolt against his lawful sovereign, the King of England, with whom I am at peace; It is hereby decreed that the said Hugo shall forfeit all titles and emoluments heretofore conferred, and his name is hereby stricken from the Family Roll. From this day he ceaseth to be a Dalberg of Valeria.

"HENRY III, Rex.

"Ye 17th October, A.D., 1777."

Frederick glanced up. "That was the judgment," said he. "Listen, now, to the pardon:—

"Section one-hundred twenty-fifth—Whereas, we have learned that our second son, Hugo, hath served with much honour in the American Army under General Washington, and hath, since the termination of hostilities, married into a good family in one of the said American States, called Maryland, and hath assumed residence therein; and whereas he hath never sought aid from us nor sued for pardon; Now, therefore, in recognition of his valour and self-reliance and true Dalberg independence, it is decreed that Section one-hundred twenty-one, supra, be annulled; and Hugo's name is hereby reinstated on the Family Roll in its proper place, the same as though never stricken therefrom. And it

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is further decreed that the marriage of Hugo and the marriages of his descendants shall be deemed valid and lawful, the same as though their respective consorts were of the Blood Royal."

"Is that sufficiently definite, sir?" the King asked.

"It is very extraordinary," I said, in wonder.

"There is a bit more," he said, and resumed reading:

"The titles conferred upon Hugo shall, however, remain in abeyance until claimed anew by him or by his right heir male; nor shall the latter be eligible to the Crown unless hereinafter specifically decreed so to be—or, in event of a vacancy in the royal dignity without such decree having been so made, then, by special Act of the House of Nobles.

" HENRY III., Rex,

" Ye 7th September, A.D. 1785."

The King closed the book. "That," said he, "is the record," and motioned me to sit down.

I obeyed mechanically. Through my head was ringing those last few words that made possible the Crown of my ancestors. Under the Decree I was, *de jure*, the eldest male after the King; it needed only his act to make me his successor. A single line, sealed with his seal, in that big book just beside me, and plain Armand Dalberg, Major in the Army of the United States of America, would be Heir Presumptive to one of the great Kingdoms of Earth. And Dehra! I could get no further. Crown and Kingdom faded and I saw only a woman's face.—

Then the King coughed, and I came sharply back

to life, and visions fled. But, even then, realities seemed almost visions, still.

I turned to the King. "Will Your Majesty permit me a few days to consider the matter?" I asked.

"As many as you wish, my boy," he said kindly.

"It is all so extraordinary. I am in no condition to look at it with even reasonable judgment."

"I think," said he, "I can quite understand."

"But there is something I can foresee, even now," said I.

The King smiled. "Trouble?"

Yes, trouble in plenty."

"But if the price be worth it all?" he asked, studying a smoke ring as it floated lazily upward.

"The trouble does not bother me."

"Oh!" said he, "I know that."

"Then, may I ask," said I, "if the Duke of Lotzen knows of these Decrees?"

"The Heir Presumptive is always made acquainted with the Laws of his House."

"What, think you, then, Sire, would be his attitude in such an anomalous situation as would follow my presence in Valeria as Hugo's heir?"

"You mean, how would he view a rival for the Crown?"

"I that's a bit broader than I intended," said I.

The King laughed. "There is no need for us to mince words—the matter is perfectly evident. Under the Law, here, it needs but my Decree to make you eligible to the Crown; and that neces-

sarily would displace Lotzen and make you Heir Presumptive. How do you think he would view it?"

"How would any man view it?" I asked.

"But what have Lotzen's views to do with the matter?" Frederick asked sharply. "I am the King; here are the Laws. What Dalberg would dispute them?"

"But, Your Majesty, Lotzen might not be alone in disputing them—the Army and the House of Nobles might join him. And, assuming that you would never intend to displace Lotzen by me, nevertheless, you would be put into the embarrassing position of seeming to be coerced by your subjects."

"Coerced! Coerced!" said Frederick, flinging his cigar savagely into the grate. "Do I hear a Dalberg fear that for his King?"

"Nay, Sire," I protested, "I did not say that."

But the anger had already passed. "Nonsense, lad, I understand you," he said; "only, I know my Kingdom better than you do—yet," and he laughed.

But I protested again. "Would it not be wiser for me to consider the question only upon the hypothesis that Lotzen shall not be displaced——?"

"Don't be a fool, Armand," Frederick cut in. "Of course, I cannot prevent your renouncing all right to the Crown, but it will be most displeasing to me and against my express wish."

"Your Majesty is very flattering."

"His Majesty is very selfish. Since he has no son, he wants the privilege of choosing his successor."

So he meant to give me a chance to win the Crown! I shut my eyes; there was too much satisfaction in them. Yet, I felt almost ashamed. I had sneered so often at Courtney and his suggestions; had called him a fool and his words nonsense—even a short half hour ago I would have done the same again. And now!—Truly there was something strangely impressive and powerfully alluring about that big, brass-bound book, with its Royal restitution and honors and the glorious opportunity extended. Would any man—nay, would any half-man refuse?

Then I opened my eyes and met the King's kindly smile.

"Did the prospect blind you?" he asked.

"Yes," said I, "it did—maybe my eyes are too weak ever to bear the bright light of royalty."

"Never fear, lad, never fear; they will soon strengthen. Ask Courtney, if you care to make him a confidant. I am very sure of his advice in the matter."

"So am I," said I.

"Any man's would be the same—your own to one in a similar position."

I could not deny it; but I would make no decision under the present influences. I must have a season of calm thought and careful judgment.

The King waited a moment. "Well, take your own good pleasure, Armand," said he; "only, the sooner you come to Court the less time you will waste."

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Of course, I saw his meaning. "I shall ask but one day, at the most."

"Good," said he. "This is Friday—dine with Dehra and me here to-morrow evening. Come by the private entrance."

Then we went back to the Princess and Lady Helen. But what a different life had opened to me in the short absence.



IX

THE DECISION

I WAS sitting alone in the library late that night when Courtney came in. He had been to some function at the French Embassy, from which I had begged off, and seemed surprised to see me.

"Taps are a bit late to-night," he remarked, pouring a measure of Scotch and shooting in the soda.

"I've been thinking," I answered.

"For Heaven's sake, Major," he began—then put down his glass and looked at me curiously.

"You were about to say?" I questioned.

He glanced at the clock. "When a man of your age sits up *thinking* until two in the morning it is either financial trouble or love."

"My finances are all right," I volunteered.

"Ergo," said he, and began to sip his Scotch.

"And I'm not——" then I stopped—"in the marrying class, you know," I ended.

"It's a pity to have such excellent raw material go to waste," he commented, and smiled.

"The truth is, Courtney, I waited up for you."

He put down his glass again. "Business?" he inquired, quickly. "Anything amiss?"

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I shook my head. "It's nothing amiss diplomatically; but it is business in a way; only, it's my personal business. I want your advice."

He looked at me, sharply, an instant. "Drive on, old man; I'm all attention," he said.

"I've been at the Summer Palace," I began.

He nodded.

"And breakfasted with the Princess Royal," I went on.

"Alone! Be careful, my dear Major," he cautioned.

"Lady Helen Radnor was there; and the King also, for a bit," I explained.

"Good," said he; "you are progressing famously."

"Oh, it was all accidental."

He smiled broadly.

"I went for an early morning ride; Lady Helen happened to overtake me; we chanced upon the Princess; she asked us to breakfast; and the King came in during the meal."

Courtney was studying the point of a paper-cutter. "Very wonderful, indeed," he commented.

"What; the paper-cutter?" I asked, a trifle impatiently.

"No; the series of accidents."

"They are only preliminary."

"Preliminaries are often most important."

"Not here," said I. "What I want to consult you about is this: The King has asked me to accept the titles of old Hugo, and to take my place at Court."

Courtney laid the paper-cutter carefully on the blotter, and drawing out his cigarette case, he selected one and slowly lit it. I knew his way and waited patiently.

"And Lotzen—and the Crown?" he said presently.

"Do you care for the whole story?" I asked.

"Yes, let me have it all," and, settling back in his chair, he closed his eyes and prepared to listen.

Then I told him everything of the meeting the King in his library, repeating, as well as I remember, Frederick's exact language, describing his attitude toward me and his evident desire in the matter.

"That is the situation and the problem," I ended, "and the answer is due to-morrow. I am to dine at the Summer Palace."

Courtney sat up and began to polish his eye-glasses. "I assume you have made no decision?" he asked presently.

"If I had," said I, "I would have gone to bed."

He nodded and kept on at the eye-glasses. At last they seemed to suit him, and he shoved them into place and lit another cigarette.

"It seems to me," he said, at length, "the matter is wholly one of personal inclination; with no obligation upon you to decide it upon any other basis. Therefore, the first question is simply this: Which do you prefer to be—an American officer and citizen or a Valerian Archduke?"

"That is just what I don't know," said I.

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"Well, would it be any easier to answer if I were to add: 'With a chance for the Crown'?"

"That complicates it even more, I think."

He looked at me hard for a moment. I knew he was thinking of the Princess and I shook my head.

"Better look at it only on the first proposition," he said: 'an American officer or an Archduke.' "

"I I accept," said I, "I shall play for all the stakes."

"Of course," said he, "but you may lose."

"It is more than likely I shall."

"Yet, even if you do, you will still be the Archduke," he argued.

"I think I would not accept it without the other chances," I said.

"Yet you would adventure those very chances without being sure of the Archdukeship?" he insisted.

I nodded, and Courtney laughed and fingered his imperial.

"You have lost several hours of sleep to-night, my dear Major, very needlessly," he said. "You know quite well you will accept Frederick's offer."

"Do you advise me to accept?" I demanded.

"Do you fancy I would advise you to do anything else?"

"You say that as my best friend?" I persisted.

"I do—and more; I urge it."

"I think I am growing childish," I said, "I can't make a decision; I'm afraid of the Dark, as it were."

Courtney nodded. "That is precisely why I am able to see the matter more clearly than you—there is no Dark to make me fearful."

"And my commission and American citizenship?"

Courtney smiled. "You will have in exchange the Patent of an Archduke of Valeria with all its powers and privileges; and, at the very least, the commission of General of Brigade in the Valerian Army. That's a trifle more than you are giving up, don't you think?"

I made no answer.

"And then," he went on, "you can throw it all over and come back to us if you get tired of your new job."

"I may be glad enough to get back to you and my American commission."

"Bother your commission! What does a man of your age and position want in the hard-working American army?" he exclaimed.

"What does a man of your age and wealth want bothering with diplomacy?" I asked.

"Because I enjoy the business, I reckon."

"Just as someone else may enjoy being a Major of Engineers."

"Come," said he; "if that's all that bothers you, I'll engage to put you back in our Army any time within two years, if you wish it."

"You are very good, Courtney," I said. "I fear, however, the War Department would not be so gracious."

He snapped his fingers. "That, for the War Department," he said contemptuously.

"Besides, I'm too old to learn a new profession," I objected.

"A new profession?" he questioned.

I nodded. "The profession of being an Archduke."

"If I might judge by the Birthday Ball," he laughed, "you will have very little to learn."

"Oh, I'm not bothered about the women; I can manage them all right."

"For the love of Heaven! don't say that so loud," he exclaimed. "One of them might hear you, and then——" and he raised his hands expressively.

"We are growing frivolous," said I, "let us go to bed."

He tossed his cigarette into the grate. "Sometimes it is well to sleep over a problem," he said. He poured two measures of liquor. "Here's to a clear mind and a right decision in the morning."

We drank it standing—and I, at least, with feeling.

I cannot say if a good night's rest had anything to do with it, but, when I awoke, my mind was made up, and I was ready to give answer to the King. It chanced that Courtney and I met at breakfast—the American customs as to meals prevailed at the Embassy—and had the room to ourselves; possibly, because we were very late and the day was very charming.

"Well," said he, "I see you've made your decision; which gets it, Valeria or America?"

"Behold a prospective Archduke!" said I.

He arose and, hand over heart, bowed low. "I salute Your Royal Highness!" he said.

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, "don't be ridiculous."

"I am quite serious. It's an unusual pleasure to have one worth saluting."

I waved the compliment aside. "If it is to terminate my old friendships or bring formality into private intercourse I shall remain American," I declared.

The diplomat smiled. "Don't you see it all rests with yourself? You can be as formal or as familiar as you please."

"I can revise my List of Friends, so to speak—drop those I don't care for and enter such new ones as I wish?"

"Exactly."

"Well, that much of the new order will be quite to my liking," said I, and turned to my mail.

The letters lay face downward, of course, and I opened them in their order without bothering to examine the superscription. Presently, I came upon one sealed with a blurred dab of green wax. Rather curious, I turned it over; it was unstamped and was marked: "Personal and Important." I did not know the hand-writing; but, then, Lady Helen Radnor's was the only one in all Dornlitz I could have known.

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"Here," said I to Courtney, "is a letter marked 'Personal and Important'; what is it; an invitation to contribute to the professionally destitute?"

"More likely an invitation to some gambling den."

I tossed it over. "Take a look at it and guess again," I said.

He glanced languidly at the envelope; then picked it up quickly and scrutinized it sharply.

"We both are wrong," he said, and he motioned for the servant to return it to me.

I knew he had recognized the writing and that it called for more respect than a careless fling across the table. I broke the seal and drew out the letter. It bore the Royal Arms over the word "Dornlitz." Beneath, it read:

MY DEAR COUSIN:

"His Majesty has told me of the meeting in the Library this morning. I know I have no right to meddle—but, won't you please accept and come back to your own? The King wants you. We shall welcome you with all our hearts. Come, Armand!

"DORNLITZ."

I read it slowly a second time—and then a third time—wondering, the while, whether I should show it to Courtney.

"You know who wrote this?" I asked.

"I know who wrote the address."

"Then know the note, also," said I, and read it to him.

His face was quite expressionless as I read; but, at the end, he gave the faintest nod of approval.

"If that does not hold you to the task, you are——" he stopped. "God, Sir! You ought to be proud to be her cousin," he ended.

I spent the balance of the day arranging the affairs of my office, to the end that I could instantly sever all official relations with the American Government, and, so assume my new rank with the least possible embarrassment to Courtney. He would, doubtless, find it unfortunate enough to have, as a Royal Archduke, one who but lately was his Military Attaché, and familiar with much of his policy and purpose. I said as much to him that evening, as we rode toward the Summer Palace, but he laughed it off.

"Embarrass me!" he exclaimed. "I shall be the most envied of the Ambassadors; sought after by all the Court for a word to my friend, the new Archduke—'that may be King hereafter.'"

"Don't," said I; "it's likely to be quite bad enough without calling on Macbeth's Witches."

He leaned over and put his hand on my arm. "Brace up, old chap," he said; "there's no boiling caldron and no witches."

"There are troubles of sorts other than those the caldron brewed," I remarked.

We turned a bend in the road. "And witches of other sorts than those of Fores' Heath," he laughed. "Behold!"

A hundred yards ahead, rode the Princess and Lady Helen Radnor.

"Here's your opportunity, Courtney," I observed.

He stared at me.

"To escort Lady Helen back to town," I explained.

"Thank you," he said, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't be a bear," said I; "most men would be glad enough for the chance."

Then we reined aside and saluted.

"Will you join us?" said the Princess.

"We shall be delighted," I said and swung over beside her.

"I don't know what to do with Lady Helen," she whispered hurriedly.

"Courtney will look after her," I volunteered.

But she did not seem to hear. "I came alone to meet you," she went on, "and overtook her on the way."

"You came to meet me?" I asked.

She nodded. "I fear you will think me very forward, but I—well, I wanted to know your decision."

"Have you any doubt of it after the note—and now?"

"Then you will accept?" she exclaimed, so loudly I raised my hand in warning.

"Yes," said I. "I shall accept—are you glad?"

She plucked at her horse's mane and glanced at me covertly; then she turned and smiled—one of those overpowering smiles that had clung to me through the years.

"Yes, Armand, I am glad. You are a—dear."

I reined over closer. "Sometime," I began—

She stopped me. "A dear *cousin*, I mean," she cut in.

I went back to my side of the road; but I took another smile with me.

Then Lady Helen pressed forward. "It is growing late, Your Royal Highness. I shall have to turn toward town," she said.

I glanced at Courtney and he nodded that he would ride back with her. And the Princess saw and understood; and would not have it so.

"No, my dear Helen," said she, "you and Mr. Courtney and Major Dalberg shall dine with His Majesty and me this evening."

"But, Your Highness,"—Lady Helen began.

"But me no buts," said Dehra; "it will be *en famille*; come along."

Courtney gave me an amused smile and shook his head; but, like a good courtier, he made no protest. For my part, I was very glad for his company on this particular evening.

We entered the Park by a narrow gate opening on a bridle path leading to one of the private doors of the Palace. As I lifted the Princess down, she whispered:

"I think you should see the King at once."

"I am in your hands," I answered.

"The others would scarcely think so," she smiled.

Then I realized I was holding her as tightly as when I had swung her out of saddle. I stepped back with a quick apology.

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"Oh, they didn't see it," she said, and ran up the steps.

I smiled. She, too, like Lady Helen, had not forgotten to look about her. Women, it would seem, are rather prudent at such times.

"Well," said Courtney, a bit later, when we were alone, "this is a queer go, sure enough. What did the Princess mean by bringing Lady Helen and me to a family party, and at such a time?"

"I think she meant to be considerate to you and good to me. She thought, doubtless, we might be glad to be in together, at the death, so to speak."

"She is very kind," said he; "but, why Lady Helen?"

"It was all a sudden inspiration and she had to take her to get you."

"I suppose the Princess will explain my presence to the King."

"Oh, he will be glad to see you; he counted on your aiding him in this matter."

"Then, it's well I didn't fail him—or my usefulness as the American Ambassador would be ended."

"Surely, he would not have held that against you?"

Courtney smiled rather grimly. "Presently, my dear Major, you will know a bit more of Courts and Monarchs."

Then the summons came from the King. Instinctively I held out my hand to Courtney. He gripped it hard.

"Good-bye, old man, and God bless you," he said. Then I followed the flunkey.



X

THE COLONEL OF THE RED HUZZARS

WHEN I entered the library, Frederick came forward and kissed me on both cheeks.

"My dear Armand," he said, "I am pleased beyond expression."

"It's a pity," thought I, "kissing isn't an expression."

"Dehra has told you?" I asked.

He nodded. "But I felt sure of you—so sure, indeed, I have all these ready for you." He picked up a roll of parchments. "Here is your Patent as an Archduke of Valeria; here are the title deeds to your ancestral estates—they have been held as Crown lands since Hugo's time; here is your commission as Colonel of the Red Huzzars; and here (and this may please you most) is your commission as Lieutenant-General in my Army."

I took them mechanically. There, were the seals, the flowing ribbons, the heavy signature of the King. The sheets rustled and twisted in my fingers, curling back and forth like things alive. I saw them dimly as though through a haze; my senses were dulled with sudden wonder and emotion. And, yet, I had

thought of it all many times since yesterday; Courtney had predicted for me some of these very honors; I, myself, had even anticipated them—indeed, they had been the powerful inducement for my decision. And, now, when I had them in my very hands, put there by the King himself, I was simply overpowered. To some scoffer I may seem sentimental or childish; and to him I say: “wait until you are in similar circumstances.”

Presently I got my senses and, I trust, thanked His Majesty in proper words. But he would have none of it.

“They are yours by right of birth, you have simply come to your own,” he said.

“But only by your gracious favor,” I protested.

“Then, do me a small return: wear the Huzzar uniform this evening.”

I must have looked my surprise.

“We are pretty much of a size and I think mine will fit you,” he observed.

“It is very little you ask, Sire.” I answered.

“Then my valet will squire you,” and he rang for the servant.

And it was well he did; for I was not used to fancy uniforms, with their peculiar fastenings and adornments, and I might have spent the entire evening in solving them. But Adolph attired me with astonishing celerity, and then, swinging a cheval glass before me, he inquired:

“Are you satisfied, sir?”

"You are a wonderful valet, Adolph," I said, ignoring the mirror.

I did not need it to know that I was clad in scarlet and gold, with a black, fur-bound dohlman over one shoulder and a tall black busby on my head. I hung the Eagle of the Cincinnati about my neck and went back to the King.

He looked me over critically and nodded. "You'll do, my boy," he said. Then he raised the Eagle and examined it. "It is a great Order," he said; "one of the greatest in the world, but a Prince of Valeria must wear his country's also," and he pinned the Star of the Lion on my tunic. "And now, come, I want to show you to your cousin."

At the door of the Princess's apartments he waved aside the footman and, himself, announced:

"His Royal Highness, the Grand Duke Armand!"

It was so unexpected and sounded so queer, withal, that, for a moment, I hesitated; then I took a fresh grip on my busby and followed the King. The next instant, I was bending over the Princess's hand and listening to her words of welcome and congratulation. When I turned to Lady Helen she curtsied deeply, even as she would have done for one of her own Princes.

"God save Your Royal Highness," she said.

And, as I raised her hand and kissed it I tried, in vain, to read in her eyes whether she meant it or was only mocking me.

Then, we went in to dinner—and, here, was a surprise for me, also.

It was the same room we had breakfasted in the previous day, but now, upon the wall, fronting us as we entered, hung a full-length portrait of an officer in the uniform of the Red Huzzars. It was the Great Henry; but it could just as well have been myself. Surely, outwardly, at least, he was my *alter ego*.

Even Courtney's astonishment pierced his heavy equanimity; and Lady Helen stopped sharply and gazed at the painting and, then, at me, and, then, at the painting, again, in silent wonder. For, although they both knew, generally, of the resemblance, it needed the uniform to bring it out in full effect.

"Your Majesty has given us a series of surprises to-night," said Courtney.

"It is surely wonderful—almost beyond belief," said Lady Helen.

"Now, you know something of my sensations when I first met him," said Frederick, "though, then, I had not the benefit of the Huzzar attire."

"And you, Princess?" asked Lady Helen.

The King laughed aloud; Courtney became absorbed in the picture; I tugged at my sword-knot—we all were thinking of the kiss before the Ball. But Dehra, naturally, thought of the meeting in the forest six years before.

"It was a long time ago, but I think I did notice the resemblance in a casual way," she said.

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The King stared at her in surprise; Courtney smiled slightly and glanced at me, and Lady Helen's eyes shot from Dehra to me and back again in a vain attempt to understand. Frederick, however, was on the point of asking an explanation when the Princess gave him a glance, and he instantly dropped the matter and motioned us to our seats.

Mine was on Dehra's right; Courtney's on her left. Presently, I heard the King say to Lady Helen:

"Come, confess you are curious how the American military attaché becomes a Valerian Archduke?"

And, through Dehra's talk, I detected the laughing answer, pitched high enough to reach me:

"'Curious' is quite too mild a word, Sire."

Then, as the King began the story, she glanced over at me and I nodded my thanks. It would have been a bit awkward, just then, if she had shown she already knew my history. To-morrow it mattered not to me if it were known the Kingdom over; aye, and farther, too. But to-morrow was the future; to-night was mine. I was in favor; a King across the table; a beautiful woman beside me. What more could any man wish?

And, when Dehra whispered: "Do you know, Armand, you are very handsome to-night?" I tossed all discretion overboard and made violent love to her before them all. Nor heeded Courtney's warning looks, nor Lady Helen's curious glances. It was Dehra, herself, who brought me up sharply, after a space.

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"I am afraid, Armand," said she, "if you flirt so strenuously with me to-night, you will have no cards left for the balance of our game."

"Our game?" I echoed blankly, forgetting for the moment the compact of the Ball.

She smiled. "You see, you play it better than I ever can. I don't even know enough to forget it is a game."

I turned and looked her in the eyes. "Then, in all you have done lately, you have been only playing the game?" I asked.

"Is that quite a fair question?" she answered.

"Yes—under the circumstances."

"But I thought you called it a game?"

"I did."

"And, yet, you ask me to spread my cards on the table?"

"Not exactly; I ask to see only the tricks that are turned," said I.

She shook her head. "It's all the same—we must play fair."

"Was it quite fair to write me that note unless you were sincere?" I asked.

She looked me straight. "Tell me," she demanded, "tell me, on your honor; had you not already made decision when my note reached you?"

I hesitated. "It clinched the matter," I said, lamely.

The Princess smiled.

"And, had the decision been otherwise, the note would have reversed it," I added.

The smile broadened. "But, since the note was in no way responsible, nor even persuasive, its sincerity does not matter," she said.

"But, if I were to change my mind?" I replied.

She glanced at my uniform and at the gleaming Star of the Lion.

"They can be removed," I said; "they are only borrowed."

"No, Your Royal Highness," said she, "they cannot be removed—not in the way you mean; your word is passed to your King."

Your King! It was the first reminder I was no longer a free American, and it gave me something of a shock. And Dehra understood, and showed no mercy.

"And, as an Archduke of Valeria, and almost the Heir Presumptive, you must know what it means to give your word to your King," she said.

"I trust I know what it means to give my word to anyone," I returned.

"Now, don't get on your dignity, Armand," she laughed. "You understand me perfectly."

I raised my hands in protest. "Understand you perfectly!" I exclaimed. "I wish I understood you even a little."

"You're not as nice as you were during the first part of the dinner."

"Did you ever hear the slang Americanism 'there are others'?" I asked.

She took a cigarette and lighted it—and passed it to me; then lighted another for herself.

"What was it you asked about that note?" she said, and gave me one of those subduing smiles.

I dropped my hand below the table and found her fingers. "You meant it, Dehra; truly?" I asked.

She released her fingers and placed both hands on the cloth. "Of course I meant it—when I wrote it," she said.

"That's quite as much as I've any right to expect," I answered.

"That's the proper frame of mind, cousin," said she.

"And the sort you prefer in your admirers?"

She raised her eyebrows—"In my relatives—undoubtedly."

"Come," said I, "we must not quarrel."

"It would be the regular thing; I fight with all my relatives."

A footman handed the King a card, received a message, and withdrew.

"Then let me prove an exception," I cut in.

"I am quite willing; squabbles are so stupid."

"Speaking of cousins; have you quarrelled with Lotzen?"

"Scores of times; we are in the distant bowing stage, now."

"Good," said I. "I trust it will continue indefinitely."

"We always make up and get very chummy after he has been absent for any time," she returned.

"I wonder how he will view his new cousin?" I said.

The Princess laughed. "With considerable surprise, I fancy; particularly if he meet you in that uniform in a dimly-lighted corridor of the palace, at night."

"Have the Dalbergs no ghost such as is appurtenant to all well-regulated royal families?"

"Alas! We have not; but you could give us a fine one."

"Well, I won't," I said.

"And yet, who knows?" she reflected with sudden seriousness; "your very resemblance to yonder picture may, sometime, be of service to you."

"Then, I shall not hesitate to use it."

"At any rate, I hope I shall be by when my cousin of Lotzen gets his first look at you."

"As the family spectre or *in propria persona*?"

"As both; but *in persona*, first," she said.

Just then, the corridor door swung back, and a voice announced:

"His Royal Highness, the Duke of Lotzen!"

The Princess caught her breath, in surprise, and glanced quickly at the King.

"Does His Highness always grant your wishes so promptly?" I asked.

But she did not hear me. She was watching the Duke as he advanced to the King and bent knee.

And I, too, watched him; and with interest—this man, with whom I proposed to make a contest for the throne.

He had the grace of one reared in Courts and the ease of one born to high command. He made me feel awkward even as I sat. His height was not above the medium, but his figure was so well proportioned he seemed almost my own size—and, yet, I knew I would top him by three inches. He wore the full dress uniform of a Lieutenant-General of Cavalry; and, with his black hair and moustache and well-cut face, he looked, in every line, the dashing *beau sabreur*.

When he had greeted the King, and spoken to Lady He. . . . He turned and, with eyes on Dehra, came toward. Courtney and I arose and stepped back. The Princess swung around in her chair and gave him her hand, but without a word of welcome—and he spoke none. Then, as he unbent, his eyes rested on me for the first time.

I have never ceased to admire the self-control Lotzen showed then. He gave me an instant's glance; flung another at the portrait behind me; and, then, clicking his heels sharply together, he raised his hand in salute—but, whether to me or to the portrait, I could not know. My own hand went up with his and remained a moment longer; for I was

the junior in actual rank, though he could not know it, for my present uniform was no guide.

"Since no one has presented the Colonel of the Red Huzzars, will he not do the service for himself?" he said, very courteously.

"I cry your pardon, gentlemen," exclaimed the King; "and I herewith present, to the Duke of Lotzen, his cousin, the Grand Duke Armand."

Lotzen extended his hand in frank greeting. "You are a Dalberg—any one could see—but whence?"

"From America," I answered.

He knew his family records well. "Then, you are the heir of Hugo," he said instantly. "And you come in good time, cousin; there have been few enough Dalbergs in Valeria this generation."

"Your cousin will appreciate your welcome," said the King, before I could make reply. Then he raised his glass. "I give you: The New Archduke," he said.

I bowed low; yet, not so low, but that I caught the smile Dehra gave me, over her glass, and the sharp glance with which Lotzen noted it.

"Is he friend or foe?" I wondered—though the answer was evident. Plainly, he was no fool and, therefore, why should he be my friend?

And such was the view of another; for, a bit later, as I swung the Lady Helen into saddle, she whispered:

"Lotzen will bear watching."

"I shall need friends," I answered, slowly arranging her skirt.

"Sometimes, a woman's wit is helpful."

"And I may count on yours?"

"Surely—mine, and another's, too, I fancy," she smiled.

Then she and Courtney rode away—but halted almost instantly, and he called back to me to stop at the Embassy on the morrow and sign some papers.

For, of course, now, I could not live, even for a night, at the American Legation; and, already, a suite had been prepared for me in the Palace.

The four of us went to the King's library; and, after a while, Lotzen withdrew on the plea of an official appointment. But His Majesty and the Princess and I sat until late in the night discussing the *modus vivendi* for me. Many matters were determined by them; and, in all, I acquiesced instantly; for they knew what was proper and I did not.

It was decided that, for the present, I was to reside in the Palace. I did not care for a separate establishment until I had more experience in the dignities of an Archduke. Neither did I desire, now, a full military staff; and so I was to have only two aides—whom Frederick selected after much thought.

The senior was Colonel Bernheim—who had brought the invitation to the Birthday Ball, and the commands of the Princess to dance with her that night. His tour of duty with the Royal Aides was about ended, and, being an officer of much experience

in the Court, he would be able to keep me straight, so to speak.

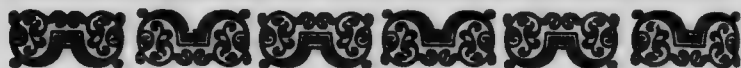
The other aide was a Major Moore—an Irish soldier of fortune, who had been in the Valerian Army some ten years, and, by his efficiency, had become attached to the General Staff. He was of noble birth—the younger son of a younger son of an Irish Earl—and “as an Irishman is more than half an American he will, doubtless, be congenial,” the King said.

I had liked Bernheim’s manner, and I was willing to risk an Irishman’s faith to his chief. I asked, only, whether either was an intimate of the Duke of Lotzen.

“That is a perfectly reasonable question,” said Frederick instantly. “I know that Bernheim has never liked the Heir Presumptive and that Moore is not a favorite with the Prince.”

“Then, I am quite content with them,” said I.

“And you may also feel content,” said he, “in that I appreciate your position here and its difficulties, and I shall stand behind you. But a King’s favorite, even though of the Royal Family, is rarely popular, so I shall obtrude no more than is necessary to show you have my good will. When you want more, ask for it.”



XI

THE FATALITY OF MOONLIGHT

THE following morning I was formally presented to the Royal Council and took my place at the Board, on the left of the King; the Duke of Lotzen being on his right. His Majesty stated briefly my descent, the law of the case as laid down by the Great Henry, and that I had accepted a restitution of the rights and privileges due to the eldest male heir of Hugo.

"I ask your consideration for him, my Lords, the same as though he were our own son," he ended. "I will answer for him—he is a Dalberg."

At this there was applause and the members of the Council pressed forward and welcomed me as an Archduke of the Kingdom, taking my hand and bending knee before me. It seemed a bit queer, but I got through it satisfactorily to myself—particularly so since there was no kissing in it.

Then the Council began its business and the Prime Minister, Count Epping, read a tentative proposition of peace, which, he said, he understood had already been practically accepted by Titia.

It provided that Murdol should be permitted to determine for itself, by the vote of its citizens, whether it would remain a province of Valeria or become, once more, a part of Titia. In the latter event, Titia was to pay Valeria the value of all the public buildings in Murdol erected or rebuilt by Valeria, and, further, to reimburse Valeria for her war expenses. But, if Murdol voted to remain with Valeria, then, Titia was to pay all the cost of the war.

"I need hardly say to the Council," the Prime Minister remarked, "that, thus far, the terms are entirely satisfactory to His Majesty; but there is another detail, suggested by our friend, the intermediary, which is not so agreeable. It is only a suggestion, but, I fear, has much to do with Titia's acquiescence. It is that the peace be further cemented by a marriage between the Royal Families of Valeria and Titia."

Then the Count sat down, and all faces were turned toward the King.

Frederick ran his eyes slowly around the table. I did the like. There were but three faces which did not show favor for the marriage—and, of course, the three were the King's, Lotzen's, and mine. At least, I assume mine evidenced my repugnance. I am quite sure I felt it.

"It is altogether useless, my Lords, for us to discuss the marriage matter," said Frederick. "I have given my word to Her Royal Highness that

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she shall not be coerced in her choice of a husband, and it shall not be broken. So long as she weds within her circle, she may marry when and where and whom she will. Save for that restriction, Valeria will make peace with Titia upon the terms specified. We refused the marriage before the war began; we refuse it now; we would refuse it were Casimir's guns thundering without the walls."

They were good courtiers—these men of the Council—for they sprang to their feet and cheered enthusiastically. And so the matter ended, for the time. Altogether, I was well pleased with the doings of the morning.

And so was Courtney, when I told him of it, over a whiskey and soda in his library, later in the day. Possibly, I violated the proprieties in disclosing the business of the Royal Council, but I knew Courtney understood I was talking to my friend and not to the Ambassador.

"I wish," said I, "you would give me your opinion of Lotzen."

Courtney smiled. "He is clever—very clever," he said.

"Even I could guess that after last evening," I cut in.

"He is ambitious, rather unscrupulous, and wholly dangerous," Courtney continued.

"A pleasant sort of rival," I commented.

"And, finally, he is infatuated with the Princess Royal."

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"That may be a fatal weakness," said I.

"Truly, you seem to have gained wisdom overnight—Your Highness," said he.

"And shall need many nights and much, very much, wisdom, I fear."

He nodded. "That you will—particularly, if you make a confidant of women."

I frowned.

"Don't imagine Lady Helen told me," Courtney explained. "I chanced to notice her greeting, last night, to the Colonel of the Red Kuzzars."

"You are too observant," said I.

"A bit more so, at that moment, than the Princess, I think."

"I trust so," said I.

"You made some rather fast going last night, my friend," he observed. "Now, it's none of my affair—only—isn't it a bit early for top speed?"

"That is exactly what the Princess suggested," said I.

He burst into an amused laugh. "Go it, my boy!" he exclaimed, "you are doing delightfully—and so is the Princess."

"Particularly the Princess," I said.

He nodded.

"And it's more than likely I am riding for a fall."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's a fast race over a strange course—and they will ride you down if they can."

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"I know it," said I, "but I fancy I shall rather enjoy the excitement—and Bernheim and Moore can be depended on, I think."

"Undoubtedly—you may be sure the King chose them advisedly. Consult them in everything—but, on particular occasions, consult——"

"I'll come to you," I filled in.

"And you may always count on my aid—but, I was about to say, upon particular occasions consult the Princess."

"Good," said I. "I shall riot in particular occasions."

"P. V." he amended.

"Oh! I'm her cousin," I laughed.

"And so is Lotzen."

"Damn Lotzen," said I, heartily.

"That's well enough as far as it goes, but it's the King's damn you want."

"I fear he does not swear in English," said I.

"Then, it's up to you to teach him—and the quickest method is to win the Princess. Marry her and you get the Crown for a bridal present."

"It may be the surest method; I doubt if it's the quickest," said I.

"Well, of course, my dear fellow," he said banteringly, "you know the lady better than I do."

"I doubt it," said I, "for I think I don't know her even a little bit."

"Good—you are gathering wisdom rapidly; indeed, you are growing almost over-wise."

"I have often wondered how you got your amazing knowledge of women," I observed.

He lit a cigarette and sent a cloud of smoke between us. "It was born in me, I think. At any rate, I've proved it—by letting them alone. Yet," he went on musingly, "were I a Royal Duke and cousin to the Princess of Valeria, I am not so sure—no, I am not so sure."

I looked at him a bit curiously. Surely, it could not be that Courtney—the indifferent—the *blasé*—envied me; that he would care to be other than he was; or that even a beautiful woman could stir his blood. Then the cloud began to thin out, and he must have noticed my surprise, for he laughed and waved his hand before his face.

"I'm like the fellow in the song," said he, "I've been 'seeing pictures in the smoke.'"

"And you liked the pictures?" I asked.

"Very much, my boy, very much indeed—in smoke."

"Someone else is improving, also," said I. "Time was when you could not have seen such pictures."

He shook his head. "It's only a sign of age. I'm becoming a dreamer; soon you will find me sitting in the sun."

"You need a wife, Courtney," I exclaimed.

He laughed. "No—I need a drink, a good stiff drink. I'm getting old, and lonely for the tried friends I've lost; you are the last deserter."

"Nonsense," I began.

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"No, it's true as gospel," he went on. "Our paths separated forever at the Palace, last night. You are a Royal Highness and the possible heir to the Throne. And I am an elderly American diplomat—here, to-day; gone to-morrow."

"You need several good stiff drinks," I interrupted.

He waved aside my banter. "I give you a toast," he went on, pouring a measure for each of us. "The Princess Dehra—and another like her."

"And may you find that other," I cried.

Then we drained our glasses and flung them into the grate.

I was tremendously astonished at this revelation of Courtney's feelings—feelings which I had never even suspected. And, I fear, I had the bad taste to stare at him. For he turned abruptly and walked to the window, and stood, for a moment, with his back to me. I drew on my gloves and hitched up my sword (I was wearing the undress of a general officer) and waited.

"Of course, you understood, last night, that there were no papers for you to sign," he said, as he came slowly back to the table.

"Surely," I laughed.

"What I wanted was the opportunity to tell you that our secret service will be at your command, and that I have given instructions to report to me anything that may be of use to you—particularly touching Lotzen and his intimates."

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"You are more than good, old chap," I said, and we shook hands hard—for the toast was still in mind.

"Present my compliments to Her Highness," he called after me.

I went back to the doorway. "And give mine to The Other Like Her, when she comes," I said.

"She will never come, Armand; she will never come. I am just an old fool." Then he laughed. "Your love-making at dinner tables didn't used to affect me."

"You never followed any of them by a moonlight ride with a pretty girl," I answered.

"At least, never with one as pretty as Lady Helen," he amended.

I was getting surprises with a vengeance.

"Is it possible you have just discovered she is pretty?" I exclaimed.

He smiled frankly. "No—but it may be I've just discovered how pretty."

"And she's more than pretty," said I, "she's thoroughbred."

He studied me for a moment. "I have often wondered—and now I wonder more than ever—why you—why you never—— You understand."

I nodded. "Yes," said I, "I understand and I rather reckon I would, if it had not been that, a year before I ever saw the Lady Helen, I had ridden with the Princess Dehra, alone, in the Palace forest, for an hour."

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At last, I saw Courtney's cold face show genuine surprise.

"And you made no effort then to prove your cousinship?" he exclaimed.

"No," said I.

"You let her go; and—and you a Dalberg and a soldier! You don't deserve her—she ought to go to Lotzen—to Casimir—to any one but you. Why, you drivelling idiot, do you realize that, but for the chance of my having lugged—yes, that's the word, lugged you here you would now be doing childish problems in cement and stone in some miserable little Army department headquarters over in America?"

It was delicious to see Courtney roused, once in his life. Choking back my laugh, I answered:

"You have not put it half strongly enough. You may be a fool, as you say—there's no doubt that I've been a colossal one."

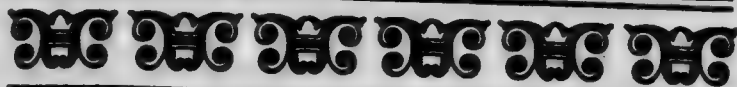
"You ought to be in an asylum for weak-minded instead of in that uniform," he ejaculated.

"But, thanks to you, I'm in the uniform and not in the asylum," I answered.

"Pray God you have sense enough, now, to keep in the one and out of the other," he retorted.

"Amen, Courtney, old man," said I, "Amen!"

Then I sprang away and into saddle—waving my hand to him as he came hastily to the door to stay me.



XII

LEARNING MY TRADE

THE next month was the busiest of my life—not excepting those at the Point. I was learning to be Royal, and I was starting a generation and a half behind time. My hardest task was in meeting the Nobility. I had been bred a soldier and had despised the politician—secretly, however, as is necessary for the Army officer in America; but no rural candidate at a Fall election ever worked harder to ingratiate himself with the people and to secure their votes, than did I to win favor with the Lords and high officers of State. And, with it all, I could feel no assurance of success—for they were courtiers, and I had not yet learned to read behind their masks; though, here, Bernheim was invaluable. Indeed, he was a wonder. I have yet to find him miss his guess.

There were constant Cabinet meetings to attend, at which my views were expected; and this entailed a study of conditions and policies absolutely new to me. Then, I was delegated frequently by the King to represent him on occasions of ceremony; and, for them, I needed careful coaching. In fact, there were

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a thousand matters which occupied me to exhaustion. And, through it all, I was trying to get familiar with the organization and administration and methods of the Valerian Army, so as to be fitted to discharge the duties of my high rank. I confess this was my most congenial labor. If I might have been simply a soldier Archduke, I think I would have been entirely satisfied.

After a few weeks I had taken up my residence in the Epsau Palace—one of my recent inheritances—and there maintained my own Archducal Court. It was a bit hard for me to take myself seriously and to accept calmly the obsequious deference accorded me by everyone. I fear I smiled many times when I should have looked royally indifferent; and was royally indifferent when I should have smiled. I know there were scores of instances when I felt like kicking some of the infernally omnipresent flunkys down the stairs. But I did not; for I knew that the poor devils were doing only their particular duty in the manner particularly proper.

Yet, there were compensations, so many and so satisfying, I never, for a moment, considered a return to my former estate. I was—I admit it—enamored of my rank and power; and, it may be, even of that very obsequiousness and flattery which I thought I despised. I know there was a supreme satisfaction when I passed through the saluting crowds in the Alta Avenue. It became almost elation when I rode

upon the parade ground to take the Review and the March By.

During this month, I had seen the Duke of Lotzen very frequently. I had sat beside him at the Council table; I had dined with him formally as the new Archduke, and informally as his cousin. And, on my part, I had repaid his courtesies in kind. He had been thoughtful and considerate to me to an exceptional degree, but, at the same time, without undue effusiveness. In a word, he had treated me with every possible attention our rank and consanguinity demanded.

Even Courtney could find nothing to criticise in Lotzen's behavior; nor had his secret agents been able to detect anything *sub rosa*.

"However, all this proves nothing one way or the other," he remarked one day, as we sat in my inner library. "If he intend the worst sort of harm to you he would begin just as he has."

I nodded.

"I suppose His Majesty knows of Lotzen's courtesies to you?"

"And is immensely gratified. Bernheim tells me the Duke never was in higher favor than at this moment," I answered.

"Exactly—and, therefore, the less likely a change in the Law of Succession. He uses you to play against you."

"And I am helpless to prevent it," said I.

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"I may not refuse his civilities nor appear to question their intent."

"Heaven forbid!" Courtney exclaimed, with lifted hands. "Your counter attack is at the King, too. Keep him interested in you."

"I have, I think. I am the new Military Governor of Dornlitz."

"Wonderful, Major!—Your Royal Highness, I mean."

"Drop the R. H., please," I said; "stick to Armand or Major."

"Thank you, I shall, in private; it's handier. And when were you appointed?"

"It will be in the Gazette this evening. His Majesty offered it to me this morning."

"Does Lotzen know it?"

"I think not; it was due to a sudden shifting of Corps Commanders made yesterday."

"I would like a view of the Duke's private countenance when he hears it first," Courtney laughed. "It's the most desirable post in the Army; even preferable to Chief of Staff. It makes you master in the Capital and its Military District, a temporary Field Marshal, and answerable to none but the King himself."

"It's just that which makes me question the expediency of my accepting the detail," said I. "It's a post to reward long service and soldierly merit. I have not the former and have had no chance to prove the latter. I fear it will

be bad for discipline and worse for my popularity."

Courtney laughed. "That might be true of the American Army—it's nonsense in a Monarchy. You forget you are of the Blood Royal—an Archduke—of mature years—with some experience in actual war—and, for all the Army and Court know, in line for the Crown. You are, therefore, born to command. There can be no jealousies against you. On the contrary, it will bring you followers. None but Lotzen and his circle will resent it, and they, already, are your enemies. The Governorship will make them no more so. Instead, it will keep them careful; for it will give you immense power to detect and foil their plots."

"Plots!" I exclaimed. "Do you fancy Lotzen would resort to murder?"

"Not at present—not until everything else has failed."

"You seem very sure," I remarked.

"Precisely that. You don't seem to realize that you have likely both lost him his desired wife and jeopardized his succession to the Throne. He might submit to losing the Princess, but the Crown, never. He will eliminate you, by soft methods if he can, by violent ones, if need be. Believe me, Major, I know the ways of Courts a little better than you."

I took a turn up and down the room. "I don't know that Lotzen isn't justified in using every means to defeat me. I am a robber—a highwayman, if you

please. I am, this instant, holding him up and trying to deprive him of his dearest inheritance. And I'm doing it with calm deliberation, while, ostensibly, I'm his friend. If I attempt to steal his watch he would be justified in shooting me on the spot—why shouldn't he do the same when I try to filch from him the Valerian Crown?"

"No reason in the world, my dear Major, except that to steal a watch is a vulgar crime—but to plot for a throne is the privilege of Princes. And Princes do not shoot their rivals."

"With their own hands," I added.

Courtney bowed low. "Your Highness has it exactly," he said.

I shrugged my shoulders. "You flatter me."

"I speak on, in general terms; they do not apply to you, my dear Major. You are not plotting to dethrone a King; you are simply trying, frankly and openly, to recover what is yours by birthright. Lotzen's real claim to the Crown is, in justice, subordinate to yours—and he knows it—and so does the King, or he would not have put you on probation, so to speak, with the implied promise to give you back your own again, if you prove worthy."

"That's one way to look at it," said I, "and I reckon I shall have to accept it. In fact, I'm remitted to it or to chucking the whole thing overboard."

Courtney smiled approvingly. "That's the reasonable point of view. Now, stick to it, and give Lotzen

no quarter—you may be sure he will give you none."

"I shall countenance no violence," I insisted.

"One is permitted to repel force by force."

"I shall not hesitate to do that, you may be sure."

"Good!" said he. "Now we understand the situation and each other; and I can assist you more effectively."

"I shall advise you the moment anything new develops," said I.

"And remember, Major, to either you or Lotzen the Princess means the Crown. Frederick will be only too glad to pass it so to his own descendants."

"That's the truth," said I. "But I reckon the Princess doesn't need the Crown to get Lotzen or me."

"Do you realize how lucky it is, under the circumstances, that you are unmarried?" Courtney inquired.

"Rather—only, if I had chanced to be married, I would still be your Military Attaché. Frederick would never have given me the chance to be an Archduke."

"At least, it's sure he would never have given you a chance to be a King."

"And the American newspapers would have missed a great news item," I added.

"I never quite appreciated what a wonder you were until they told me," he laughed. "You seem to possess a marvellous assortment of talents—and,

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as for bravery, they have had you leading every charge in the Spanish War."

"It's all very tiresome," I said.

"It's one of the penalties of Royalty—to be always in the limelight and never in the shadow," he returned. "How does it feel?"

"Come around to-night to the Royal Box at the Opera and get into the glare, a bit," I said. "I am to take the King's place and escort the Princess."

"Is that a command?" he asked.

"Hang it all, Courtney——" I exclaimed.

"Because, if it isn't," he went on, "I shall have to decline. I'm dining with the Radnors and going on to the Opera with them."

I looked at him expectantly for a moment, giving him an opening to mention Lady Helen; but he only smiled and lit another cigarette. I understood he declined the opening. Indeed, he had never referred to Lady Helen since that first surprising time. But, if the gossip of the Diplomatic set, which, of course, reached the Court promptly, were at all reliable, another International marriage was not improbable. I admit I was a bit curious as to the matter—and here I saw my opportunity.

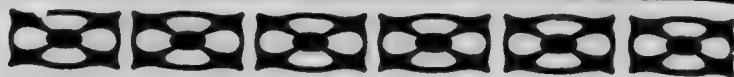
"If you will permit," said I, "I'll send an Aide to invite the Radnors and you to the Royal Box during the last act, and then, later, to be my guests at supper on the Hanging Garden."

"You're very kind, old man," said he; "and as for

old Radnor you will endanger his life—he will just about explode with importance.”

“I trust not,” said I; “I like Lord Radnor—and then explosions are disconcerting at the Opera or a supper.”

I had good reason, later, to remember ‘his banter—for there was an explosion at the supper that night that was more than disconcerting; but Lord Radnor was in no way responsible.”



XIII

IN THE ROYAL BOX

WHEN the Princess and I entered the Royal Box that night the applause was instant and enthusiastic. I kept a bit in the rear; the greeting was for her. And she smiled that conquering smile of hers that went straight to every individual in the audience as a personal acknowledgment. I had seen it frequently in the past month; yet, every time, to marvel only the more. Small wonder, indeed, that she was the toast of the Nation and the pride of the King. A million pities the Salic Law barred her from the succession. What a Queen Regnant she would make! Aye, what a Queen Consort she would be! What a wife!

Then the last high note of the National Air blared out and the Princess, turning quickly, caught my look and straightway read my thoughts. A sudden flush swept over her face and neck and she dropped her eyes. Silently I placed a chair for her; as she took it, her bare arm rested against my hand. The effect on me, in the stress of my feelings at that moment, is indescribable. I know I gasped—and my throat got hot and my heart pounded in sharp pain.

But I did not withdraw my hand—nor did the Princess remove her arm. Its soft, warm flesh pressed against my fingers—the perfume of her hair enveloped my face—the beat of her bosom was just below me.

A fierce impulse seized me to take her in my arms—there, before them all, the Court and the Capital. Reason told me to step back. Yet I could not. Instead, I gripped the chair fiercely, and, by that very act, pushed my fingers only more closely against her.

Was I dreaming—or did I feel an answering pressure, not once but twice repeated. I was sure of it. I bent forward. Quickly she looked up at me with eyes half closed.

"How cold your hand is, Armand," she said.

"Does it chill you, dear?" I whispered.

She smiled. "It never could do that," she answered. "But won't you sit beside me, now?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I said reluctantly. "Only, I'm nearer you as I am."

Then I took my chair, drawing it a trifle in the rear, so, being obliged to lean forward, I would be closer to her and could speak softly in her ear.

"You're very bold, Armand; you are always doing things so publicly," she said.

"It was an accident—at first."

"And afterward, sir?"

"Afterward, I was powerless."

"My arm would not believe you."

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"Powerless to remove my hand, I mean."

"Powerlessness, with you, has queer manifestations," she said.

"Yes—sometimes it's passive and sometimes active."

"It was active, I suppose, that day in the King's cabinet, when you gave me that cousinly kiss."

"If we were not so public I would——"

She looked at me with the most daring invitation. "It is because we are so public that you are permitted to sit so near."

"Then, why blame me if I take the only opportunities you give me?" I asked.

She half closed her eyes and looked at me, side-long, through her lashes.

"Have I ever blamed you?" she asked.

"Dehra," said I, "if you look at me like that I shall kiss you now."

She closed her eyes a trifle more. "Where, Armand?" she said. "You have been kissing my hair every time I let it touch your lips."

"Let it touch them again, then," I whispered.

She turned her head sharply from me and, then, slowly back again; and her perfumed tresses, dressed low on her neck, brushed full and hard across my face, from cheek to cheek.

"There, cousin," said she; "am I not good?"

"Not entirely, when you call me 'cousin,'" I said, looking her in the eyes.

"Your Highness, then," she smiled.

"Worse still."

"Marshal."

"No better."

"Marshal would please most men," she said.

"There is only one name from you will please me, now," I answered.

She quite closed her eyes. "You are an autocrat to-night, Armand," she murmured.

"I'm your lover, sweet heart; your lover to-night and always," I said impetuously.

She opened her eyes wide and looked into mine with that calm, deep search which only a good woman has power to use. I knew, and trembling waited. What she saw in my eyes then she would see there always—in storm, in sunshine—in youth and in old age.

Then, suddenly, her glance dropped and a blush stole slowly across her cheek.

"To me, dearest," she said softly, "you have been a lover since that day in the forest when you were only Captain Smith."

I bowed my head. "You Princess of women," I said. "How near I was to losing you."

She turned and deliberately let her hair rest on my face a moment.

"There, dear," said she, "is my first kiss to you. I shall have to wait a bit for yours to me."

"And you really want my kiss, Dehra?" I asked doubtfully. Small wonder I realize my fortune.

"You great stupid," she laughed. "Can't you understand I have wanted it for six long years?"

"I think," said I, "I'm dreaming."

"For a dreamer, you're wonderfully brave," she said. "Do you appreciate that you had the audacity to propose to the Princess Royal of Valeria while she sat in the Royal Box before all the fashion of Dornlitz?"

"My dear," said I, "I would propose to her a dozen times under like conditions if I thought, at the end, she would do as she has done to-night."

"If she had known that, she might have put you to the test."

"It would have made her wait only the longer for that kiss she wants," I said.

"Oh, I fancy, sir, she could have had your kiss without accepting you. She needed only to give you half a chance."

"I think," said I, "even less than half a chance from you, dear, would have been successful."

She studied her fan a moment. "From me, *only?*" she asked.

"From you, only," I said. "It would require a trifle more than half a chance from anyone else."

"Even from the Lady Helen Radnor?" she asked.

I watched her face a moment. There was, I felt, only one way to play this out.

"Well," I answered, "it might be that an even half chance would suffice from her."

"It took rather less than that at the Birthday Ball, didn't it?"

I had the grace to keep silent—or, maybe, I was too surprised to know an answer. I did not have the courage to meet her eyes. I stared into the audience, seeing no one, thinking much—hoping she would speak; but she did not.

Presently I turned, looking like a whipped child, I know, and met Dehra's smiling face.

"Tie my slipper, dear," she said, "the ribbon has come undone."

"You sweetheart!" I said. "You sweetheart!"

She drew her gown back from the footstool, and I slowly tightened the silken bands over the high-arched instep—very slowly, I confess.

"You're very naughty, Armand," she said, shaking her head in mock reproof.

"Doesn't the other shoe need fastening?" I asked.

"No, sir—and, if it did, I would have the Countess tie it."

"Bother the Countess," I said. (The Countess Giska was the Princess's chief Lady in Waiting—and she and my aide-de-camp, Moore, were in the rear of the Box, which, fortunately, was sufficiently deep to put them out of ear-shot.)

"Or, I might ask Major Moore. I think he would be glad to do it," she said.

"He would be a most extraordinary Irishman if he were not more than glad," I said. "But, when I'm around, Dehra, the pleasure is mine alone."

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"Goodness, Armand, you would not be jealous?" she mocked.

"I don't know what it's called," said I, "but that's it."

"Haven't you ever been jealous, dear?" she asked.

"I never cared enough for a girl to be jealous," I said.

"I fancy you've cared for so many you had no time to entertain the Green-eyed Monster," she said.

I evaded the thrust. "Has he ever visited you?" I asked.

She ignored the question.

"Isn't Lady Helen beautiful to-night?" she said—and smiled a greeting toward the British Ambassador's Box.

Instantly, Lord Radnor and Courtney arose and bowed low. I returned the salute in kind.

"Tell me," I said. "Were you ever jealous?"

She kept her eyes on the stage. Carmen was the opera, but, thus far, I had not heard a single note.

"I am waiting for you to answer my question," she said, presently.

"I fear I missed it," I replied.

"Queer, surely—it was about Lady Helen. I asked if she were not beautiful to-night."

"She is always very handsome," I said. "And she looks particularly well in blue."

Dehra smiled slyly. "It's the same gown she wore at the Birthday Ball."

I bit my lip—then, suddenly, I got very brave.

"Tell me," I said. "How did you know I kissed her, that night?"

"I saw it."

"The Dev—! Oh!" I exclaimed. I was brave no longer. I got interested in the opera. Presently, I ventured to glance at Dehra—she was laughing behind her fan. Then I ventured again.

"I hope," said I, "I did it nicely."

"Most artistically, my dear Armand. Escamillo, yonder, could not do it more cleverly."

I winced. It is not especially flattering to an Archduke to be classed with a toreador—and Carmen's toreador, least of all. Yet, I recognised the justice of the punishment. Bravery had failed twice; it was time to be humble.

"I am sorry, Dehra," I said.

"Of course you are, sir, very sorry—that I saw you.—And so was I," she added.

"Was?" I echoed.

"It gave me *un mauvais quart d'heure*."

"No longer than that?" I asked.

"No; it lasted only until I had you to myself on the terrace, a little later."

"And then?" I queried.

"Then? Then I was no longer jealous of the Lady Helen. Your eyes told me there was no need."

"There never has been anyone but you, my darling," I whispered.

"And never will be, Armand?" she asked.

"Please God, never," I said; and, forgetting where we were, I made as though to take her hand.

"Not now," she smiled. "Wait until after the Opera."

"It will be a longer wait than that," I said regretfully. "I have told Courtney I would invite the Radnors and him to take supper with me on the Hanging Garden, to-night."

"Why don't you say 'take supper with us'?"

"You mean it, Dehra?" I asked in surprise. "You have always refused, hitherto; and I have asked so often."

She smiled. "Hitherto was different from now," she said.

"Thank God for the now," I added.

"We might bid them here for the last act," she suggested.

"I have presumed to hint as much to Courtney," I said; and told her how it had all come about in my talk with him that morning.

"Delightful!" she exclaimed. "And we will have a jolly party on the Garden—and let us be just like ordinary folk and have a public table—only, a little apart, of course."

"It shall be as you want," I said, and dispatched Major Moore to the Radnor Box with the invitation.

When he returned, I stepped into the corridor and gave him explicit instructions as to the supper. I had encouraged both him and Bernheim to intimate when I was about to make an Archducal *faux pas*,

and I saw he did not approve of the public table. But I gave no heed. I knew perfectly well it was violating official etiquette for the Princess to appear there at such an hour; but it was her first request since—well, since what had occurred a few minutes before—and I was determined to gratify her. And Moore, being a good courtier, and knowing I had observed his warning, made no further protest, but saluted and departed on his mission.

When I rejoined Dehra she had moved forward and was looking over the audience.

"I have found an ex-compatriot of yours," she remarked.

"Yes?" I said, rather indifferently.

"She has just come into the third box on the right. She is wonderfully beautiful—or, at least, she looks it from here."

"I've got someone wonderfully beautiful beside me," I answered.

"But have you no interest in the American?" she asked.

"None—except that she interests you. In the third box, did you say?" I asked, turning slowly toward it.

"Why, Armand, you know her!" said Dehra, suddenly.

Trust a woman to read a man's face.

"Yes," said I, "I have seen her before to-night."

She gave me a sharp look. "And have known her, too—*n'est ce pas?*"

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"Yes—after a fashion," I answered.

She studied the woman for a space.

"Is that her husband behind her?" she asked, presently.

I smiled. "Very possibly," I said.

"Had she a husband when you knew her?" she persisted.

"Part of the time." I was a bit uncomfortable.

"And the man, yonder, is not he?"

"No," said I.

She gave me a sidelong glance. "And her name?" she asked.

"It used to be Madeline Spencer."

"You showed excellent taste, Armand—both in her looks and name." There was something of sarcasm in the tone.

"Don't be unjust, sweetheart," I said. "She never was anything to me."

"Are you quite sure?"

"On my honor."

She gave a little sigh of relief. "I am glad, dear; I would not want her for a rival. She is much too beautiful to be forgotten easily."

"The beauty is only external. She is ugly in heart," I said. "I wonder what brings her to Dorn-litz?"

"The man beside her, doubtless," said Dehra.

"Then he's spending money on her like water—or she has some game afoot." I exclaimed.

"You paint her very dark, dear."

"Listen," I said. "She was the wife of Colonel Spencer of the American Army. He married her, one summer, in Paris, where he had gone to meet her upon her graduation from a convent school. She was his ward—the child of the officer who had been his room-mate at the Point. Within two years Colonel Spencer was dead—broken-hearted; a wealthy Lieutenant of his regiment had been cashiered and had shot himself after she had plucked him clean. Since then, she has lived in the odor of eminent respectability; yet, as I know, always waiting for a victim—and always having one. Money is her God."

"And, yet, there seems to be nothing in her appearance to suggest such viciousness," said Dehra.

"Nothing," I said; "and, hence, her danger and her power."

"You knew her when she was Colonel Spencer's wife?"

"I met her at the Post where he commanded—and, later, I saw her in Washington and New York. She had been in Pittsburgh for several months before I left—angling for some of the *nouveaux riches*, I fancy. There was plenty of gossip of her in the Clubs; though I, alone, I think, know her true history."

"And you did not warn anyone of her?"

"So long as she let my friends alone I cared not what pigeon she plucked. And the very fact that she knew I was in Pittsburgh, was enough to make her shy of anyone I would likely care for."

Dehra laughed lightly. "Maybe you were a little bit afraid of her, yourself," she said.

"Maybe I was," I admitted; "for she has a fascination almost irresistible—when she choose to exert it."

Dehra looked at me steadily.

I understood.

"Yes," said I, "she has made a try at me; once in New York; again, and only recently, in Pittsburgh. I escaped both times, thank God."

"She may make another try at you here."

I laughed. "She failed twice in America; she can scarcely win in Dornlitz when you are beside me."

"But I'm not always beside you," she objected.

"Not physically," I said.

"What chance would a mentality have against that woman's actual presence?" she asked.

"It would depend entirely on the man, and I am immune—thanks to Spencer's dead face and your sweet one."

Dehra smiled brightly. "Spencer's dead face is a mentality infinitely more potent than my living one; but I think the two should hold you. Yet, I hate that woman yonder. I believe she has dared to follow you here."

I shook my head. "Never in my life have I used words to woman such as I used to her in Pittsburgh. Oh, no, she has not followed me."

"Then, why is she here—so soon after your coming?" Dehra persisted.

"Why do thousands visit Dornlitz every month?" I asked.

"She is no casual visitor."

"Very likely," I agreed. "Madeline Spencer is not the sort to do casual travelling. She has an object—but it is not I."

"I wish I could feel secure of it."

"Do you mean it's I you doubt, dear?" I asked.

She gave me her sweetest smile. "I shall doubt you, Armand, only when you yourself order me to—and, even then, I may disregard the order."

Before such love a man falls abject in his absolute unworthiness.

"I don't deserve such trust, sweetheart," I answered humbly—and I think my voice broke in the saying.

"I'll risk it," she replied. "If I were as sure that woman's presence meant no harm to you I would be altogether easy."

"What harm could she possibly do to an Archduke of Valeria?" I laughed.

"None that I can imagine, I admit—unless she seek to discredit you with the King."

"But from what possible motive?"

"Revenge for your double scorning of her."

I laughed. "Madame Spencer has no time for such foolishness as revenge."

"I hope you may be right, dear; but a woman's intuition bids you to beware."

"Would you like to have the authorities look into her business here?" I asked.

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"Yes, I surely would."

Just then Major Moore entered. I motioned him forward.

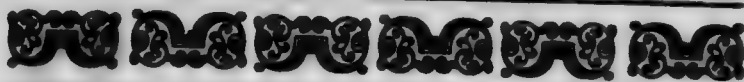
"Everything is arranged for on the Garden as Your Highness ordered," he reported.

I thanked him. "One thing more, Major," I said. "My compliments to the senior officer of the Secret Police on duty here to-night, and ask him to send me, in the morning, a full report on the parties occupying the third box on the right in this row. And do you take a good look at them yourself; it may be well for you to know their faces."

"What a satisfactory Aide," said Dehra. "His eyes didn't even waver toward that other box."

"Not only that," I answered; "but, when Moore does do his looking, those in that box won't know it, you may be sure."

Then the bells rang for the last act—and the Radnors and Courtney were announced.



XIV

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

To those who have never been to Dornlitz I may say that the Hanging Garden is the name for the great balcony of the Hotel Metzen. It suggests—very faintly—the Terrace at Westminster; though, of course, it is far more beautiful, with the dancing waters of Lake Lorg instead of the dirty, sluggish Thames. It is the peculiarly fashionable restaurant, and is always thronged in the evening with the aristocracy of the Kingdom. To-night, the extreme end of the balcony had been reserved for me, and a very slight bank of plants was arranged to separate us from the general crowd.

Just before the final curtain, His Highness of Lotzen had strolled into the Royal Box. To my surprise he congratulated me very heartily upon my appointment as Governor of Dornlitz; and, perforce, I invited him to join us at supper.

He hesitated a moment, and I urged him to come. In fact, I felt a bit sorry for him. He had just lost the Princess and, with her, likely, his chance at the Throne, as well. And I had won the one and, very possibly, the other, also. I could afford to be gener-

ous. After to-night, however,—when he had learned of these facts—it would be for him to indicate as to our future attitude. For my part, I was quite willing to be friendly.

The entrance of my party made something of a sensation. To reach our table, we were obliged to pass down the Garden almost half its length and the people arose instantly and bowed.

To Lotzen, this deference was such an ordinary incident of his daily life he, doubtless, scarcely noticed it. But I was still fresh in my Royalty and it did attract me—though, I think I appreciated what he did not; that their courtesy was, in truth, to the Princess only, and not to us. Indeed, it would have been just the same if the King himself had been with us. When Dehra was in presence the people had eyes for her alone.

The supper was deliciously cooked; the wine was excellent; the service beyond criticism. I had given the two Ambassadors to Dehra and had put Lady Helen between Lotzen and myself, with Lord Radnor on the Duke's left.

We were a merry party. Dehra was positively bewitching and Radnor was simply fascinated. He could scarcely take his eyes from her, even when addressed by Lotzen; which was very little, for the Duke devoted himself very assiduously to Lady Helen. So I was remitted to Lady Radnor, who was about the most tiresomely uninteresting mortal it had been my misfortune to know —

a funeral service was an extravaganza in comparison to her talk. In Washington, my rank had never entitled me to a seat at her side at dinner; and many was the time I had chafed Courtney, or some other unfortunate, who had been so stranded beside Her Ponderousness. To-night, however, my turn was come, and Courtney was getting his revenge.

My only solace were the occasional smiles that Dehra gave me—smiles that Courtney noted instantly and, I fancied, understood; and that Lotzen intercepted; but what he thought I did not know and did not care. Who ever cares what his defeated rival thinks!

We had been there for, possibly, half an hour when, happening to glance outward, I saw Madeline Spencer and an elderly woman, and the man who had been in the box with her, coming slowly down the Garden. It chanced that a table near us had just been vacated and they were shown to it by the headwaiter, whose excessive obsequiousness proved the size of his tip.

Mrs. Spencer gave our party a single quick glance, as she drew off her gloves, and then fell to conversing with her companions.

All this I had noted out of the corner of my eye, as it were. I had not the least doubt she had recognized me at the Opera, and I did not intend to give her a chance to speak to me—which I knew she would try to do, the Pittsburgh experience not-

withstanding, if she thought it might further her present plans or pleasures.

Lotzen, however, had been drinking rather freely and was not so chary with his glances. Indeed, he stared so frankly that Lady Helen did not hesitate to prod him about it.

"I would take her to be an American," I heard him say.

"Without a doubt," Lady Helen answered.

Inwardly, I consigned the Spencer woman to perdition. They would be interrogating me about her, next; and I did not know just how to answer. I would have to admit knowing her; that would only whet their curiosity and bring further questions. To tell the whole story was absurd—and, yet, only a little of it would leave a rather unpleasant inference against me. At any rate, on Dehra's account, I did not want the matter discussed.

I could feel Lotzen's glance, and I knew he was waiting only for a break in Lady Radnor's discourse. I gave him as much of my back as possible, and encouraged her to proceed. She was on the Tenement House problem; but I had no idea what she was advocating, in particular. I did not care. All I wanted was talk—talk—talk. And, whenever she showed signs of slowing up, I flung in a word and spurred her on again.

And she responded nobly; and I marvelled at her staying powers—at Lord Radnor's fortitude through so many years—at Lady Helen being the child of

such a mother. But, all the time, I was conscious of Lotzen waiting—waiting—waiting. I could hear his voice and Lady Helen's merry laugh, yet I knew nothing but the ending of the supper and the breaking of the party, with Lady Radnor still riding her hobby, would save me from the question. I threw in another remark to keep her going. It was fatal.

Lord Radnor heard it; and, catching his wife's reply, I saw him frown.

"Lord bless us!" he exclaimed to the Princess and Courtney, "we must rescue His Highness—Lady Radnor is on the Tenement problem."

I tried to signal Courtney to keep Radnor occupied; but he did not understand, and only smiled and whispered something to the Princess. Then Lord Radnor caught his wife's eye and the old lady's discourse ended abruptly.

"I fear I weary Your Royal Highness," she said.

"On the contrary, I am deeply interested," I assured her. "Pray continue."

Her glance wandered eagerly across the table, but she got no encouragement from the Ambassador.

"Your Highness is very gracious," she said, "and, sometime, if you are so minded, I shall gladly show you the late reports from the London Society."

I dared not urge her further; Lord Radnor would have suspected me of making sport of his wife. So I cudgelled my brain for some other subject to talk up with her. Of course, I failed to find it instantly,

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and, in the momentary silence, Lotsen's opportunity came.

"Armand," he said, leaning a bit forward, "Lady Helen and I have been discussing the woman in black, yonder—the pretty one. We take her to be an American—what is your opinion?"

The whole table heard the question, and every one looked at the lady—either immediately or when they could do it with proper discretion.

"You mean the woman with the elderly couple, just near us?" I asked, glancing thither, and so on around to the Princess, who met me with a smile.

"The same," said Lotzen.

"You're quite right," said I; "she is an American."

"You know her?" he asked.

"I used to know her."

He hesitated a moment—and, of course, everyone waited. "Couldn't you still know her enough to present me?" he asked.

I shook my head. "You would be most unfortunate in your sponsor," I answered.

He smiled indulgently. "I'll risk it," he said.

"But, maybe, I won't," I answered.

His smile broadened. "Come, come, cousin mine," he said; "don't be selfish with the lady."

I smiled blandly back at him, though my hand itched to strike him in the face.

"My dear Duke," I said, "you forget I may not yet have had time to acquire certain of the—diletante accomplishments of Royalty."

His expression changed instantly. "I beg your pardon, Armand," he said, "I was only joking."

I saw Courtney glance at Lady Helen and slowly shut one eye. He knew, as did I, that Lotzen lied.

"There is naught to pardon, cousin," I said. "We both were joking."

Then Lady Helen came to my relief.

"But there is considerable for Her Royal Highness and me to pardon," she said.

"Yes," said I, "there is."

"I take all the blame," Lotzen interrupted. "I alone am guilty; proceed with the judgment."

"What shall it be?" said Lady Helen to the Princess.

Dehra shrugged her pretty shoulders and raised her hands expressively.

"The only punishment that fits the crime is to deprive the Duke of Lotzen of all wine for the rest of the evening."

It seemed to me the Duke winced.

"Your Highness is severe," he said.

She looked him straight in the eyes. "On the contrary, cousin, I am kind to put it so—and you know it."

But Lotzen's equanimity was not to be disturbed. He smiled with engaging frankness.

"The Queen can do no wrong," he said, and bowed over the table.

Just then, Madeline Spencer arose and I breathed

a sigh of relief—she was going. The next instant I almost gasped. Instead of going, she came swiftly toward us—passed the low bank of plants—and straight to me.

I arose—all the men arose—and bowed stiffly.

She hesitated and seemed a bit embarrassed—then, suddenly, held out her hand to me.

"I am afraid, Armand," she said, "you are not glad to see me."

Armand! Armand! Lord, what nerve! A rush of sharp anger almost choked me, yet I tried to look at her only in calm interrogation.

"I think, Mrs. Spencer," I said, just touching her hand, "almost every man is glad to see a pretty woman."

She gave me a look of surprise; then, threw up her head, disdainfully.

"You called me 'Mrs. Spencer'?" she asked.

I looked at her in surprise. "I was not aware you had changed your name." I answered.

She took a step backward. "You were not aware of what?" she exclaimed.

"That you were no longer Mrs. Spencer," I said—a trifle curtly, maybe. I thought she was playing for a presentation to the Princess and I had no intention of gratifying her, even if I had to be rude to her deliberately.

She passed her hand across her brow and stared at me incredulously. I turned half aside and glanced around the table. Every face but three showed

blank amazement. Of those three, the Princess's wore a tolerant smile; Lotzen's a frown; but Courtney's was set in almost a sneer. And, at it, I marvelled. Later, I understood; he had, by some queer intuition, guessed what was to follow.

When I came back to Mrs. Spencer her expression had changed. The incredulous look was gone; bright anger flamed, instead.

"Do you still persist, sir, that you do not know my rightful name?" she demanded.

From my previous acquaintance with the lady I knew she was working herself into a passion; though, why, I could not imagine.

"My dear Madame," I said, "why such pother over such a trifle? If your name be, no longer, Madeline Spencer, tell me what it is. I shall be profoundly glad to call you by it—or any name than Spencer," I added.

She felt the thrust and her eyes answered it. Then, suddenly, she turned and faced those at the table.

"Your pardon," she said, speaking straight at Lord Radnor, "will you tell me if this man here"—waving her hand toward me—"is Major Armand Dalberg?"

Lord Radnor bowed. "That gentleman is His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Armand of Valeria," he said.

"Erstwhile, Major of Engineers in the American Army?" she asked.

"I believe so, Madame," said his Lordship, stiffly.

"Thank you," she said. "And now——"

But I broke in. "Madame," I said sharply, "you have presumed beyond forbearance. Major Moore, will you escort the lady to her companions."

Moore stepped forward and, bowing very low, offered his arm. Like a flash, her face changed and she met him with a smile.

"Just a moment, if you please," she said, with softest accents. Then, with studied deliberation, she turned her back on me and swept the Princess an elaborate courtesy.

"Your Royal Highness may pardon my intrusion," she said, "when I tell you that I am Armand Dalberg's wife—— Now, Major Moore, I am ready," and she put her hand upon his arm.

But Moore never moved. Instead, he looked at me for orders.

Language is utterly inadequate to describe my feelings at that moment; so I shall not try. Imagination is better than words. I know I had an almost uncontrollable impulse for violence—and I fancy Courtney feared it, for he stepped quickly over and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you, old man," I said. Then I looked at the Princess.

She was leaning carelessly back in her chair, watching the Spencer woman through half-closed eyes—a bright flush on each cheek and a faint

smile, half sneer, half amusement, on her lips. Suddenly she looked at me, and the smile flashed out into such an one as she had given me in the Royal Box.

My heart gave a great bound—I knew she trusted me, still. I turned to the woman in black.

"Is it possible, Madame, that you claim to be my wife?" I asked.

She dropped Moore's arm and took a step toward me—and, as I live, there were tears in her eyes.

"What has changed you, Armand?" she asked. "Why do you flout me so?"

I stared at her. "God help me, woman, you must be crazy!" I said.

She put out her hand appealingly. "You don't mean that, dear, surely?" And, now, the tears were in her voice, too.

"What I mean, Madame, is that you are either crazy or playing some game," I answered curtly.

She brushed aside the tears and gave me a look of almost heart-broken appeal.

"Why do you deny me, Armand?" she cried. "Have I grown ugly in the last few months? Has the beauty you used to praise turned so soon to ashes?"

Unfortunately, for me, her beauty had not turned to ashes. She was, at that very moment, the handsomest woman I had ever seen—save only the Princess. The slender figure—the magnificent neck and shoulders—the roll upon roll of jet-black hair—

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the almost classic face—and all in distress and trouble.

She was a picture, surely; and one that was making its impression; judging from the faces of Lord and Lady Radnor. I changed my manner.

"My dear Mrs. Spencer," I said kindly, "no one may deny your beauty—and I, least of all. But I do deny that I am your husband. You are, evidently, ill, and laboring under some queer hallucination."

She shook her head. "You know perfectly well, Armand, I am not ill nor under a delusion," she said, and looked me straight in the eyes.

"Then, Madame, you are a wonderful—actress," I answered.

Again the tears welled up, and one trickled slowly down her cheek. She turned quickly and made as though to go. But Courtney stayed her.

"My dear Madame," he said, with that gracious courtesy of his, which I have never seen equalled by courtier of any Court, "may I ask you a question?"

She inclined her head in answer and waited.

"You have claimed a Royal Duke of Valeria as your husband, and he has denied the claim. It is a most serious matter. It was done in the presence of many witnesses, and your words, or some of them, were, doubtless, overheard by those at nearby tables. The Capital will be full of the affair; and the results may be most unfortunate for you, and for His Highness. I am the American Ambassador; here is the Ambassador of His Majesty of England;

and, yonder, is His Royal Highness the Grand Duke Lotzen, Heir Presumptive to the Valerian Throne——”

“Your speech is long, sir,” she said; “please come to the question.”

Courtney bowed. “I was but trying to explain why I ventured to meddle in Madame’s business,” he said.

She smiled wearily. “Your pardon, Monsieur; pray proceed.”

“The question I want to ask is this,” said Courtney: “Will you not tell us when and where you became the wife of Armand Dalberg?”

“Yes, Monsieur, and gladly—and I thank you for the thought. I was married to Armand Dalberg—then a Major in the American Army—on the twenty-first day of last December in the City of New York.”

(That was only two months before I had sailed for Valeria; and I had been in New York that very day.)

“And by whom, pray?” I exclaimed.

“By the official you provided,” was the curt reply. Then, to Courtney, she added: “I don’t recall his name but my certificate shows it, I suppose.”

“And you have the certificate with you?” he asked.

“It is somewhere among my luggage. If you care to see it I shall try to find it to-morrow.”

“Thank you, Madame,” Courtney answered.

Then Lotzen took a hand.

"Will Madame permit me, also, to ask her a question?" he said.

"Certainly, Your Highness," she answered, and would have curtsied had he not waved her up.

"Was the marriage secret?" he asked.

The answer was instant: "It was private but not secret."

"Then, why is it that Major Dalberg's record in the War office in Washington makes no mention of this marriage? I happen to know it does not."

"I do not know," she answered, rather tartly. "It was not, I assume, my duty to report it."

"And, further, Madame," Lotzen continued. "If Major Dalberg were lucky enough to marry you, why, in Heaven's name, should he deny you within a few short months?"

"I might guess one of the reasons," she answered languidly—and let her eyes rest upon the Princess.

And Dehra laughed in her face.

Lotzen shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

"Are there any more questions, Messieurs?" she asked.

No one answered.

"Then, with your permission, I will obey my husband's orders and withdraw," she said mockingly. "Major Moore, your arm."

When she was gone, Lotzen turned to me and held out his hand.

"I'm with you, Armand," he said heartily. "She's

no wife of yours, certificate to the contrary notwithstanding."

I thanked him gratefully—the more so since it was so totally unexpected. Then, without giving the others an opportunity to express their opinion (they would, of course, have been constrained to agree with the Heir Presumptive; all except the Princess, and, of her, I had no doubt) and addressing, particularly, the Radnors, I said:

"The supper is spoiled beyond repair, I fear, but I shall ask you to go on with it, for I wish to acquaint you with some facts in the life of the woman who claims me as her husband."

"We are quite ready to accept Your Highness's simple denial," said Lord Radnor.

"I prefer you hear my story first," I answered.

Then I told them, in detail, what I had only outlined to the Princess, concerning Madeline Spencer. When I had finished, Lord Radnor shook his grey head gravely.

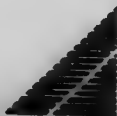
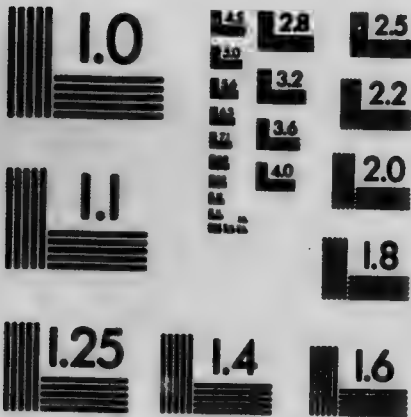
"His Highness of Lotzen is quite right," he said. "You never married that woman. Either she is a blackmailer or she is doing this in pure revenge. What's your notion, Courtney?"

"The marriage story is, of course, a pure lie," said Courtney, "but, there, I quit. I never try to guess a woman's purpose—and a pretty woman's least of all."

"God bless me, man!" Radnor exclaimed; "for a bachelor you are wondrous wise."



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"Maybe that's why he is a bachelor," said Lady Helen.

"But even the wise get foolish at times," I said—and smiled at her. And she made a face at me behind her fan.

Then the Princess arose and, taking Lord Radnor's arm, she led the way down the garden. I came last with Lady Radnor. When we reached the exit Dehra insisted upon waiting until the Radnors and Courtney had gone. She was, she said, helping me do the honors. Then, when her own carriage was at the door, she turned to the Countess Giska.

"His Highness will drive with me," she said. "Major Moore, will you escort the Countess?"

"But, Dehra——" I protested.

She was in the brougham, now.

"You will not permit me to drive alone to the Palace," she said.

"But, Dehra——" I began again.

She reached over and took my hand.

Still I hesitated.

"Come, sweetheart," she said softly.

I could resist no longer. I sprang in; the door slammed, and we were alone together.

No, not alone, either. The Spencer woman was there with us—before us—all around us. "I am Armand Dalberg's wife" was pounding in my brain.

Then I felt a soft little hand slip into mine; a

perfumed hair tress touched my cheek; and the sweetest voice, to me, on earth whispered in my ear.

"Don't I get my kiss now?"

I flung my arm about her and caught her close—then loosed her sharply and drew back.

"God help me, Dehra, I may not," I said.

She laughed softly, and again she found my hand—and I felt her hair brush my face—and her body rest against my shoulder.

"Why, Armand?" she asked. "Why may you not kiss your betrothed?"

"Because," said I, "because——"

"Yes, dear, go on," she whispered.

I drew my hand away from hers. "Did you not hear that woman claim me as her husband?" I said.

But she only pressed the closer. I was in the very corner of the carriage now; I could retreat no farther. And, maybe, I was glad. I think I was.

"But that's no reason," she insisted. "You are *not* her husband."

"You believe that, dear?" I cried.

She put her arms about my neck and kissed me, almost fiercely, on the lips—then, suddenly, drew back and, with both hands pressed against my breast, she viewed me at arm's length.

"Believe it?" she said; "believe it? I never believed anything else."

I took her hands and reverently touched them to my forehead—then, held them tight.

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"After all these years, God would not send you to me just to mock my prayers," she added.

"But the certificate!" I objected.

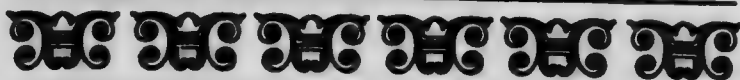
"A lie or a forgery," she said scornfully.

I drew her head upon my shoulder. "Sweetheart," I whispered; "may I kiss you, now?"

She lifted her dear face and looked up into mine with glistening eyes, her lips half parted. My own eyes, too, were wet, I think.

"Yes, Armand—now and always," she answered.

And, so I held her, for a moment; then, bent and kissed her. And that kiss is on my lips this instant, and will be until they numb in death.



XV

HER WORD AND HER CERTIFICATE

IF any man—having lived a bachelor to early middle life, has then found his ideal, and has been, unexpectedly and undeservedly, favored with her love, and then, within two hours thereafter and in her very presence, has been claimed by another woman as her husband—that man will be able to appreciate something of my state of mind. No one else could, so it is not worth while attempting to describe it.

I admit I lay awake most of the night trying to determine how to meet the Spencer woman's attack. And I had reached no satisfactory decision when I went down to breakfast.

The formal ceremony of my taking over the Governorship of Dornlitz was fixed for noon. I would be occupied the remainder of the afternoon at hear' arters; and then, in the evening, I was to give a dinner to the ranking military officers in the Capital. I wanted to get some plan of action arranged at once and, feeling the need of clear-headed counsel, I dispatched Bernheim to the American Embassy with a request that Courtnev

join me immediately. I had just finished my meal when he was announced, and we repaired to my private cabinet.

The top paper on my desk was the report of the Secret Police upon "The occupants of the third box on the right," which I had ordered the previous evening. I carried it to Courtney and we read it together. It was long and detailed and covered all the movements of the trio since their entry into Dornlitz.

In effect it was: That the elderly couple were only chance acquaintances of the younger woman, having met her on the train en route from Paris; that they had reached the Capital the previous day and had registered at the Hotel Metzen as "Mr. and Mrs. James Bacon, New York City," and "Mrs. Armand Dalberg and maid, Washington, D. C.;" that the Mrs. Dalberg had remained in her apartments until evening, had then dined in the public dining room with the Bacons, and the three had then gone to the Opera; that no callers had been received by any of them, so far as known by the hotel's officials; that, after the Opera, they had been driven directly to the hotel and had gone into the Hanging Garden and had taken a table; that, presently, the one known as Mrs. Dalberg had intruded upon certain personages of high rank, who were at a near-by table; that, after a rather prolonged discussion, she had been escorted back to her companions, the Bacons (who had, meanwhile,

remained at their table) by an Aide-de-Camp of one of the high personages; that the lady in question and the Bacons, very shortly thereafter, retired to their apartments. At six A. M.—when the report was dated—they were still in their respective apartments.

I flung the report on the desk.

"Damn that woman!" I exclaimed.

Courtney sat down, and the inevitable cigarette case came out.

"That's scarcely emphatic enough, my dear boy," he said. "Go into the next room and cut loose a bit."

"I've nothing else to cut loose with," I replied. "I used up everything, last night."

"Good," said he. "If the pressure is off, you are in shape to think."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not—that's why I sent for you—to do the thinking."

He picked up the Police report. "I'm glad she registered as Mrs. Armand Dalberg," he said.

"The devil you are!" I exclaimed.

He nodded. "The first problem to solve is: What motive this woman has in proclaiming herself your wife. There are only two motives possible, I think, and this registry utterly eliminates one of them."

"You mean it is not blackmail," I said.

"Exactly."

"And the other motive?"

"Revenge."

"Oh, no," I said; "that woman didn't come from America to Dornlitz simply for revenge."

"Very good," said Courtney. "Then, the motive is not hers and we must look elsewhere for it."

"If you mean she is only a tool," said I, "that is almost as unlikely as revenge."

"On the contrary, why couldn't it be both—and, also, a big pile of money?" he asked.

"Because," said I, "she would balk at the notoriety."

Courtney laughed. "Good, yellow gold, and plenty of it, is a wonderful persuader."

"Come," said I; "what's your guess in the matter?"

He tossed aside his cigarette and leaned a bit forward in his chair.

"The lady has been purchased by someone to come here and pose as your wife; the moving consideration to her was enough cash to make her independently rich and the pleasure of thus being able to square off with you, on her own account. That's my guess—and I fancy it's yours too," he ended.

I laughed. "Yes," said I; "it is. I spent the night over the mix and that's the best solution I could make."

Courtney lit a fresh cigarette. "Of course, it's Lotzen," said he. "And a very clever plot it is. No Princess and no Crown for you, my boy, until this Madame Armand Dalberg is eliminated—and, maybe, not even then."

"Your 'then' is the only rift in the cloud," said I.
 "Eliminate the Spencer woman, and, I think, I can manage."

He looked at me questioningly.

"Her Highness was very gracious to me last night," I explained—and I felt my face getting red.

Courtney got up and came over to me.

"Is it up to a hand-shake, old man?" he asked.

I nodded, and we gripped fingers.

"It would have been up to the King, to-morrow, but for this miserable wife business," said I.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Lotzen does not hold all the cards—you've got a few trumps, too. It will be a pretty game."

"For the spectators," I supplemented.

"For you, too; when you get into the swing of it."

"I wish I had your happy way of viewing things," I said.

He laughed. "Oh, it's easy to view some other fellow's happily. That is why a friend's advice is usually serviceable."

I took a pipe and began to fill it. "It's that advice I want," I said.

He was silent for a space. I smoked and waited.

"I suppose you had no opportunity to talk with the Princess after the supper, last night?" he said.

I smiled. "I drove with her to the Palace."

"Alone?" he exclaimed.

"Yes—she ordered me in with her and sent the Countess with Moore."

He sat up sharply. "Gad! Major, she's a treasure!" he exclaimed. "That tells me what I want to know: she has measured the Spencer woman's story."

"Both story and certificate," said I. "She says the one is a lie and the other a forgery."

He raised his hand emphatically. "My dear fellow," he said, sternly, "if you didn't get down on your knees, last night, and thank the good God for that brave girl up yonder in the Palace, you deserve to lose her—and I shall go over to Lotzen's side, myself."

"Well," said I, "I didn't. I was too busy thinking about and praising her."

"That's the same thing," he said. "I'll stay with you."

I got up and bowed.

"Thank you, Your Excellency," I said.

Then we both smiled.

"It's queer," said Courtney, "how, even in the most embarrassing difficulties, a woman's love makes a man's heart light."

I nodded. I was thinking of the drive to the Palace.

Courtney's laugh aroused me. "Come out of the brougham," he called.

"That is where I was," I admitted.

"The next thing," said he, "is to see that marriage certificate."

"If there be one," I questioned.

"There is one—of that you may be sure."

"She offered to show it to you, to-day," said I.
"Call her bluff."

"I'm going to accept her offer, when I leave here. And, what's more, I shall see the certificate," he said. "This plot has been too well laid for the essentials to have been overlooked. I'll bet a twenty you were in New York City on the twenty-first of last December."

"Yes," said I, "I was. So it's up to proving the certificate a forgery."

He shook his head. "I fear we shall find it a perfectly regular certificate."

"You mean," said I, "that they have bribed some official to make a false record?"

"Just that."

"Then, if the woman, the official and the records all convict me, how am I to prove my innocence?" I demanded.

"By waiting the enemy to make a blunder. They have already made one which results delightfully for you."

"I reckon I'm a trifle thick-headed, Courtney," I said. "You'll have to explain."

"Never mind the head, old man; it will be all right to-morrow. Their blunder is in having unwittingly sprung their trap on the very evening the Princess and you came to an understanding. Had they been even a few hours earlier you would not have dared to speak of love to her—and so you might not

have had the King's daughter as a special advocate. On the other hand, had they waited a day longer, your betrothal would, doubtless, have received Frederick's approval, and have been formally proclaimed. How embarrassing, then, to the Princess; how intensely irritating to the King, and how particularly injurious to you in the eyes of the nation—the people would think you won her under false colors; and, though you proved your innocence a hundred times, the taint would always linger."

"You're right, Courtney," I exclaimed; "right as Gospel!"

"Now, see how lucky you are: You have the Princess—you are sure of her and no one knows it. You go to the King, to-day; tell him the whole story of the Princess and you, and of this Spencer woman's claim and history. Ask him to suspend judgment until you can establish the falsity of her charge. If I know Frederick, you need have no fear of his answer."

"It's the only course," said I; "but, first, I would like to know the facts as to that certificate."

Courtney arose. "You shall have a copy of it before candle-light," he said. "Where can I see you, if there is anything of my interview with the lady I think you need know?"

"I'll be here at six o'clock," said I.

"Very good—and, of course, not a word to-night to the King as to Lotzen. Let him guess that for himself."

"Trust me," I answered; "I'm getting more awake."

Then I sent for Moore. "Colonel Moore," I said (as Aide to a Field Marshal he was entitled to a Colonelcy, and had been gazetted to it in the orders of the previous evening), "has the scene in the Garden, last night, become public talk?"

"I fear so, sir," he replied.

"Come, no sugar—out with it."

"Well, Your Highness, the town rings with it. It's the sensation of the hour."

"Good," said I. "The more they talk, to-day, the less they will talk, to-morrow."

I paused, and looked him over. He was a thoroughbred; clean-cut, handsome, manly. I never saw a finer figure than he made in his blue and white uniform.

"Now, why wasn't the lady sensible, Colonel, and marry herself to you instead of to me?" I asked.

He fairly jumped. "God forbid," he exclaimed. Then, he laughed. "Besides, I'm thinking, sir, it wasn't looks she was after."

I laughed, too. "Go 'long with you," I said; "you deserve court-martial."

Then I sent him to the King with the request to be received at seven o'clock. He also carried a note to the Princess, telling her I would call at six thirty.

In due time, he returned: The King would receive me at the hour named. The Princess, however,

sent her reply by a footman. It was a note; and, except that I was expected *for sure* at six thirty, it is quite unnecessary to give its contents. They were not intended for general circulation. I might say, however, that the note was eminently satisfactory to me, and that I read it more than once. And it was in the inside pocket of my coat when I rode across to Headquarters to assume my new authority.

The ceremony was very brief. The retiring Governor, Marshal Perdez, with an Aide, met me at the causeway and escorted me to the large audience chamber, where His Majesty's formal order was read. Perdez then presented his staff, and the doors were thrown open and I received the officers of the Army and Navy on duty at the Capital. It was all over in an hour, and I was alone in my office with Bernheim.

I walked over to a window and stood there, in wondering reflection.

Less than three months ago, I was simply a Major in the American Army, with small hope of ever getting beyond a Colonel's eagles. The "Star" was so utterly unlikely that I never even considered the possibility. It was only a rainbow or a mirage; and I was not given to chasing either.

And, to-day, I looked down on the crowded Alta Avenue of Dornlitz—then, up at the portrait of my Sovereign—then, down at my uniform, with a Marshal's insignia on the sleeve and the Princess Royal's note in the pocket.

What mirage could have pictured such realities! What rainbow could have appeared more dazzlingly evanescent!

Then I saw a Victoria approaching. And in it was the Spencer woman—brilliantly beautiful—haughtily indifferent. The passers-by stared at her; men stopped and gazed after; even women threw glances over their shoulders. And small wonder—for, the Devil knows, she was good to look upon.

As she came opposite me she looked up and our eyes met. I gave no greeting, you may be sure; but she leaned forward sharply and smiled and waved her hand. I gritted my teeth, and would have stepped back, but the crowd, following her direction, caught sight of me and a faint cheer went up. The men took off their hats and the women fluttered their kerchiefs. I bowed to them and saluted with my hand.

"Damn her!" I said, not knowing I spoke audibly. Then I remembered Bernheim; he was standing at another window.

"Colonel," said I, "did you see that woman in the Victoria?"

His heels came together with a click. "Yes, Your Highness.

"Have you heard of the occurrence in the Hanging Garden, last night?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Well, that's the lady," said I. "What do you think of her?"

He hesitated.

"Speak out," I said.

"I think it is absolutely incomprehensible how such a woman would lend herself to Lotzen's plot," he answered, instantly.

I looked at him in vast surprise.

"So, you have guessed it," I said.

"I know Lotzen, Your Highness."

I motioned to a chair. "Sit down," I said.

Then I told him the whole story—saving only so much as concerned the Princess individually. He was plainly pleased at my confidence—and I learned many things from him, that afternoon, which opened my eyes concerning some of the Court officials and Ministers.

It was exactly six o'clock when Courtney was announced. Even as he came into the room, he drew an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me.

"A copy of the certificate," he said.

I read it very carefully. In effect, it certified that Patrick McGuire, an Alderman of the City of New York, had, on the twenty-first day of December, 190—, in that City, in the presence of John Edwards of said City, united in marriage Armand Dalberg, Major, U. S. Army, and Madeline Spencer, widow, of Washington, D. C.; there appearing, after due inquiry made, to be no legal impediment thereto; and the parties thereto having proven, on oath, their identity and their legal age.

"Well, I'm not a lawyer," said I, in disgust; "but this thing sounds pretty strong. I fancy it is about as close as I shall ever come to reading my own obituary."

"It's more than strong," said Courtney: "it's in strict conformity with the New York law."

"But, the license," I objected.

"None is required in New York."

I threw up my hands. "You saw the original certificate?" I asked.

"Yes. The lady, herself, had gone out, but had left it with her maid. And I have not the least doubt of its genuineness."

"Then, we are up to Alderman Patrick McGuire," I said.

"I cabled at noon to Washington asking the Department to obtain, immediately, full information as to his character and reputation."

"Courtney, you're a wonder," I said.

"I'm glad you approve," he answered. "I thought it well to move at once, so the inquiry could be in New York early this morning; and, even if it took the whole day to investigate, the answer should be here by midnight at the latest."

Just then, there was a knock on the door and a footman entered.

"For His Excellency, the American Ambassador," he said, and handed Courtney an envelope.

"Here it is, now," he said. "Cosgrove has hurried it to me."

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Crossing to my desk he ran a knife under the flap and drew out a cablegram, glanced at it an instant, then, gave it to me without comment.

It was in cipher, of course; but, below it, Cosgrove had written the translation. It read:

"Individual named was killed last week by car at Twenty-third Street and Broadway. Character and reputation only ordinary. Integrity very doubtful. A professional ward politician."

"So," said I. "Exit the Alderman. It's a crying pity that car didn't get in its work four months ago."

"Let us be thankful for what it did do, last week "

"One lying mouth stopped," said I.

He nodded. "And only an inferior reputation left to bolster up his certificate."

I looked again at the copy. "I wonder if that car, by any possibility, might have hit Witness, John Edwards, too?"

Courtney smiled. "It's dollars to nickels the same blow killed them both."

"Then, it's my word against hers and the certificate."

"Not exactly. It's her word, her beauty and the certificate against your word, its corroborating circumstances and her history."

"That sounds logical," said I; "and yet, in fact, if there were nothing but her word it would still win out for Lotzen. I may not marry the Princess so long as another woman claims to be my wife."

Courtney frowned. "But, if you prove her a liar by cold facts?"

"It will not suffice," said I. "All doubt must be removed. She must admit her—error."

He raised his eyebrows, and out came the cigarette case.

"Then, do you appreciate that, until she does, you will have the disagreeable duty of preventing her from departing the Capital—certainly the Kingdom?"

"Practically that," I admitted. "I have already directed that she be not permitted to leave Dorn-litz."

He shook his head. "There, you send me over to the Enemy. If she appeal to the Embassy I may not suffer her to be restrained. She is an American subject."

"Not at all," said I. "If she be my wife, she is a subject of His Majesty, Frederick the Third."

"Come, Major, that's not half bad," he laughed. "And I'll stand on it, too. So long as the lady claims to be the wife of a Grand Duke of Valeria, the American Ambassador will absolutely decline to interfere in her behalf."

"She may get powerfully tired of having me for a husband," I observed.

He studied the smoke-rings a bit.

"I wonder just how far it would be well for you to play the husband?" he mused.

"What's that?" I almost shouted.

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"I mean, how far would she be willing to go in this wife business?"

"God knows—but the whole way, I fancy."

"Would it be worth while to bluff her by pretending to acknowledge her claim and, then, inviting her to take her place at the head of your establishment?"

"Acknowledge her! Not for the millionth of a second."

"Oh, I mean only before witnesses who understood the scheme."

"You don't know the lady, Courtney," I answered. "She would call the bluff instantly—and do it so well the witnesses, themselves, would be deceived and turned against me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Lotzen seems to be uncommonly lucky in his leading woman," he observed.

"The Devil usually helps his own," said I. Then, I hastened to the Palace.



XVI

THE PRINCESS ROYAL SITS AS JUDGE

DEHRA was alone in her library, and she came forward with both hands extended.

"It has been a long day, Armand," she said.

I took her hands and kissed first one and then the other.

"Yes, dear one, it has been a long day," I said.

I led her to a chair and stood before her. She held up her hands and regarded them critically. Then she looked up at me with quizzical eyes.

"You like my hands?" she asked.

"Yes, dear."

"Better than my lips?"

"No, dear."

"Well, one might think so. But, if you don't, then, sir, I'm waiting." Her peremptoriness was very sweet.

I had gone there determined to take no lover's privileges until the cloud I was under had been removed. But, what would you! I was not stone, nor ice—and, no more was the Princess.

"You are a very imperious little sweetheart," I said, and kissed her; and whether once or twice or oftener does not matter.

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She drew me down on the arm of the chair.

"I know what was in your mind, dear," she said; "and it's very good of you; yet, we settled all that last night. I don't care a rap for that woman."

I let my fingers stray softly through her hair.

"Not even if she have legal proof I am her husband?" I asked.

"You mean that certificate," she cut in. "Have you seen it?"

"Courtney has; and it's very regular and very formidable."

She tossed her head sharply.

"It certifies a lie. I wouldn't believe a hundred of them."

"You're a wonder, Dehra; a perfect wonder," I said. "Why should you trust me so?"

She looked up with one of those subduing smiles.

"I don't know, dear," she said. "I have not bothered to analyze it. It's enough for me that I do."

"And enough for me, too, sweetheart," I said and bent and caressed her cheek.

When I raised my head, the King was standing in the doorway. I sprang up and saluted.

"I assume you were not expecting me," he remarked, looking straight at me.

"Your Majesty's logic is faultless," I replied—and I saw the Princess smile.

He came nearer and let his eyes search my face a moment.

"Can you say as much for your conduct just now, my Lord Duke?" he demanded.

I gave him look for look.

"If judged upon the true facts I can," I answered.

He studied me a moment longer; then, motioned to a chair. As I made to take it, Dehra caught my hand.

"Sit here, Armand," she commanded, touching the arm of her own chair.

I hesitated; and the King regarded her in stern surprise. Then I smiled a negation and went on to the place Frederick had indicated. Straightway, Dehra got up and, coming behind me and leaning on the chair back, she put her arms about my neck.

I reached up and took her hand—then, arose and stood beside her.

"You see, Your Majesty," said she, with calm finality, "I know the true facts."

For a space, Frederick's face remained absolutely expressionless; then, it slowly softened.

"It seems to me there are a few facts which I, too, might, possibly, be permitted to know," he said.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"It was to tell Your Majesty those very facts that I sought an audience, this evening," I said.

Just then a clock began to chime slowly the hour. The king waited until the last stroke—the seventh—had sounded, then, he nodded.

"I am listening, Marshal," he said briskly.

It might be that, after one has asked twelve or

thirteen fathers for a daughter, in marriage, he has got sufficiently hardened to confront the fourteenth with, at least, a show of indifference; but, as this was my first father, I admit I was a trifle uneasy along the spine; and, somehow, my voice seemed to get lost in my throat, and the words were very reluctant in coming. I suppose Frederick saw my embarrassment for he smiled broadly.

"Come, Armand," he said; "pull up that chair. I suppose we may not smoke here," he added; "though I think I detect the faint suggestion of a miserable cigarette," and he looked at the Princess.

Dehra took a tiny jeweled case from somewhere about her gown and offered it to the King.

"Will Your Majesty try a Nestor?" she said.

Frederick shook his head in repugnance.

"His Majesty, most certainly, will not," he said.

"But His Majesty's daughter will—with his permission."

Frederick laughed. "Or, without it, if need be," he said. "She is a very headstrong young woman, Armand," he observed to me.

"So His Highness has already done himself the honor to tell me," said she airily.

"Good!" said the King. "I admire his pluck."

Dehra blew a cloud of smoke at me.

"So do I," she answered.

Then she went over and kissed the King.

"Be nice to Armand," she whispered (but loud enough for me to hear) and left the room, flinging

me a farewell from her finger tips, as I held back the portière.

And Frederick continued to smile, and my courage grew proportionately. I came straight to the point.

"May it please you, Sire," I said. "I have the honor to pray the hand of the Princess Royal in marriage."

The King's smile faded; and his eyes travelled slowly from my head to my feet and back again to my head, for all the world as though I were on inspection-parade.

I knew what was in his mind and my courage evaporated instantly. I began to feel like a soldier caught with uniform awry and equipment tarnished.

"Do you give me your word, sir, that you are free to marry her?" he demanded, suddenly.

"On my honor, as an officer and a Dalberg," I answered.

Instantly his manner changed.

"That's quite enough, lad," he said. "If the Princess wants you—and it would seem she does—I shall not say her nay. Maybe, I am rather glad to say yes."

I tried to thank him, but he would not let me.

"It's a matter for the two most concerned to arrange," he declared. "I never did fancy these loveless royal marriages. They are very little better than false ones." Then he laughed. "Tell me about this one of yours," he said; "the 'true facts' as you called them."

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So, I told him, in detail, of the supper in the Garden, the astonishing accusation of the Spencer woman, and of what I knew concerning her in America. It was a long story, but Frederick's interest never dulled. At the end, I handed him the copy of the marriage certificate and the cablegram to Courtney. He read them very carefully; then smoked awhile, in silence.

"I suppose you have your own notion as to this woman's motive?" he said.

"Yes," I answered.

"Do you care to give it to me?"

I let him see my hesitation.

"Well, I think it is not entirely revenge," I said.

"It might even be that she is only playing the cards someone else has dealt her," he said significantly.

I smiled and made no answer.

"They are mighty strong cards, Armand," he said.

"And a mighty strong player holds them," I added. "More's the pity."

He nodded. "I saw the lady this afternoon in the Park. I rather fancy almost any man would be quite willing to have her claim him as her husband."

"And, therefore, her story will be very generally accepted," I said.

"Doubtless—it's far easier to accept it than to disbelieve it."

"Consequently, if it please you, Sire, let my betrothal to Her Royal Highness remain secret

until this woman's claim has been thoroughly disproved."

Frederick thought a moment. "You are entirely right," he said; "and, particularly, since, under old Henry's Decree, she would be your legal wife—assuming, that is, that you had married her." Then he smiled. "You see, sir, the very thing you were so insistent upon, now works to your disadvantage. If it were not for that Decree you could laugh at this woman. I could simply pronounce her morganatic, and you would be quite free to marry Dehra, at once."

But I shook my head. "I must bring Dehra a clean record," I said; "and I have no fault to find with that Decree. But for it, I would not be here—though, neither would Madame Spencer," I added inadvertently.

The King stared at me.

"You don't think she knows the Decree," he exclaimed.

"I think she never heard of the Laws of the Dalbergs," I answered. "I mean that it was my being here that brought her."

Again the King smiled.

"What you mean is that she would not be here but for the fact that by Henry's Decree she would be your lawful wife and I powerless to interfere."

I made no answer. I was rather anxious for him to pursue the premise to its conclusion.

"You see where that deduction leads," he went on:

"only Dehra and Lotzen know the Laws of our House."

"I ask Your Majesty to observe that I have made no deduction," I said.

He stopped short and looked at me, a moment.

"Quite right," he said; "and it's proper you should not to me. But, I suppose you will concede it was not the Princess."

"Certainly," I agreed.

"Ergo—it must have been——"

"I stop at the Princess," said I.

He sat silent, frowning very slightly.

"If I were quite sure that Lotzen were the instigator of this plot, I would remove him utterly from the line of succession and banish him from the Kingdom."

I thought it a proper time for me to be very quiet.

"In the meantime, however, I shall send that infernal woman packing over the border by the quickest route," he said vehemently.

"I trust not, Sire," I said. "As Governor of Dornlitz, I gave orders, this morning, that she be not permitted to leave the Capital."

"But, she's an American subject!" he exclaimed. "She can't be held prisoner."

"If she's my wife, she's a subject of Your Majesty."

"True! But why do you want to keep her here?"

"To give time to investigate her doings since I became an Archduke," I said. "I may not marry Dehra in the face of that certificate and old Henry's

Decree; and, since the Alderman is dead, only through Madeline Spencer herself can the falsity of her claim be shown. Every moment here she must act her part and be under our constant surveillance. Sometime, she is sure to make a slip or forget her lines. But, let her be at large and, with plenty of funds at her command, she will be a will-o-the-wisp, to be followed over the world for years—and her slips will be few and very far between, and with no one there to note them."

"Very good," said Frederick; "keep her or send her, as you see fit—only, don't embroil me with America, if you can avoid it."

"There is no danger," I assured him. "Courtney says he will not interfere, so long as she claims to be my wife."

Frederick laughed. "Courtney's a friend," he said heartily.

"None better lives," I replied.

He lit a fresh cigar and studied the coal, a bit.

"I wish you would tell me," he said, "whether you have any evidence connecting Lotzen with this matter."

"Not a scrap nor a syllable," I answered promptly.

"Has he ever exhibited any ill will toward you?"

"None, whatever. On the contrary, he has been uniformly courteous and considerate—and I have told you of his action, last night, at the supper."

"All of which is just what he would do if he were guilty," was the answer. "No, no, Armand; your

refusal to implicate Lotzen does you credit, but this attack on you comes at such an opportune moment, for him, that he may not escape the suspicion which it breeds. I don't want to believe him guilty. yet——" and he raised his hands expressively.

Then the portières parted and the Princess stood in the doorway. Frederick saw her.

"Come in, Your Highness," he said.

She crossed to him and patted his cheek.

"Have you been nice to Armand?" she asked.

"He seemed to think so. I told him he might have you."

"You dear old father!" she exclaimed; and slipping to his knee, she gave him a long hug.

"Hold on, daughter; there are two conditions," he said. "One is that you order Armand about, now, instead of your Father."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Sire," said she, "I'm quite able to order you both."

"There's not a grain of doubt of that. But, you would better hold off on Armand until you have him safely tied up; he may rue bargain."

"I fancy I can wait that very short time," she laughed, looking at me.

"But, maybe, it won't be a very short time," the King remarked.

She tossed her head.

"It's the woman's privilege to fix the day."

"Which brings me to the second condition," said he; "that, until the present wife, which some one

seems to have provided for Armand, has been eliminated, not only may there be no marriage, but the betrothal, itself, must remain a secret with us three."

"But she's not his wife!" Dehra exclaimed.

"No," said the King, "she is not his wife. If I thought she were, there would be no betrothal."

Dehra's small foot began to tap the floor.

"I have told Armand I don't care a rap for that woman," she answered. "And if, as Your Majesty admits, she is not his wife, why should she be permitted to control the situation to her own liking?"

The King looked at me with an amused smile.

"There, sir," said he, "you see what an unreasonable little woman you're seeking to marry."

I leaned forward and took Dehra's hand.

"I think I rather like this particular sort of unreasonableness," I said. Then, to her, I added: "But I must endorse His Majesty's second condition."

She frowned; then seated herself on one end of the high writing table.

"I am prepared to hear your arguments, messieurs," she said. "Pray proceed and be brief."

The King nodded to me.

"You have the opening," he said.

So, I explained the whole matter, as best I could, and the reasons which moved the King and me in our decision as to the betrothal remaining secret and the marriage deferred

Dehra heard me through without comment; then she turned to the King.

"May it please your Honoress," said Frederick, "I cannot do more than endorse and support all that my colleague has so ably presented. We appeal to the Court's well-known sense of propriety, and throw ourselves upon her mercy."

"We have been much impressed by the argument of the learned counsel," said Dehra, in formal tones, "and, while not agreeing with all that it contained, yet, we are disposed to regard it, in the main, as sound. The second condition is therefore sustained.—But, I wish I could tell that woman what I think of her!" she exclaimed.

"God forbid!" the King ejaculated.

Dehra went over and kissed him.

"You're a dear," she said.

Then, she came across to me.

"And what is he?" asked Frederick, with a laugh.

She drew back quickly.

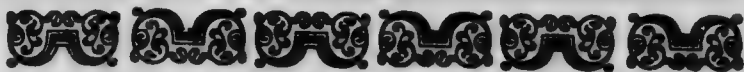
"According to his argument, he is only my cousin, the Grand Duke Armand," she answered.

"But, you said you did not agree with part of my argument," I objected.

"Did I?—Well, then, that must have been the part," she said.

The King arose.

"I think it's time for me to go," he said.



XVII

PITCH AND TOSS

THE following morning, I cabled a detective agency, in New York, giving them all the material facts in the case and requesting them to make an exhaustive investigation of the movements of Madeline Spencer during the period intervening between my confirmation as an Archduke and her sailing for Europe. I told them I required evidence, promptly, to disprove the marriage, and gave them *carte blanche* in its gathering. At the same time, I wired a prominent Army officer, at Governor's Island, to vouch for my order. I wanted no time lost while the Agency was investigating me.

Of course, the natural method would have been to direct the Valerian Ambassador, at Washington, to procure the information; but, I felt quite sure, that would simply be playing into Lotzen's hand. Some one in the Embassy would be very willing to oblige the Heir Presumptive by betraying me. And it was only reasonable to suppose the Duke had already arranged for it. It was one of those "trifles" which, as Courtney had said, would not be overlooked.

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About noon, Bernheim came in with a card in his fingers and a queer smile about his firm-set lips.

I took the card.

"The devil!" I exclaimed. Then I looked at Bernheim. "What's the move, now?"

"That is what I tried to find out, sir," he answered.

"And failed?"

"Completely. And, yet, I didn't dare to dismiss her without your direct order."

"As she well knew."

"And as she had the effrontery to tell me," he added.

I laughed. "And did it very prettily, too, I'll wager."

"Quite too prettily. 'Come, Colonel Bernheim,' she said, looking me straight in the eyes, and smiling sweetly enough to turn most any man's head, 'you want to refuse to let me see the Marshal, but, you know perfectly well, you dare not. He might be glad for a word with me in private; and then, again, he might not—but you don't know and you are afraid to risk it. *Voilà!*' And then she laughed."

"Well," said I, "I can't imagine what she wants, but you may admit her—Stay a moment—could you manage to overhear the conversation?"

"Only by leaving the door ajar."

"Well, do what you can," I said.

I was curious by what name he would announce the lady; but he used none. He simply swung back the door and spoke into the outer room:

"Madame, His Royal Highness will receive you."

"You are most kind, Colonel Bernheim," she said, in her sweetest tones, as she passed him; "I owe you many thanks."

"You owe me none, madame," was the rather gruff answer.

Then he went out, and closed the door with altogether unnecessary vigor.

She turned and looked after him.

"What a great bear he is, Armand," she said, with a confidential air.

I stiffened. "You wished to see me, Mrs. Spencer," I said.

She laughed. "Still denying me, are you?" she rippled—"And even in your own private office!"

I looked at her, in silence.

"Please don't trouble to offer me a chair, dear," she went on; "this one looks comfortable,"—then calmly seated herself, and began to draw off her gloves.

The cool assurance of the woman was so absurd I had to smile.

"I fancy it would be quite superfluous to offer you anything that chanced to be within your reach," I said.

"Certainly, dear, when, at the same time, it chances to be my husband's," she answered, and fell to smoothing out her gloves.

"Come, come!" I exclaimed. "What's the sense in keeping up the farce?"

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"What farce, Armand, dear?"

"That I am your husband," I answered curtly. Her 'dears' and her 'Armands' were getting on my nerves.

Her face took on an injured look.

"Judging from your action, the other night and now, it would be well for me if it were a farce," she said sadly.

I walked over to the table, on the far side of which she sat.

"If possible, madame, that, here, alone with me, you have the effrontery to maintain you are my wife

She put her elbows on the table and, resting her chin in her hands, looked me straight in the eyes.

"And do you, sir, here, alone with me, still have the effrontery to maintain that I am not your wife?" she asked.

"It's not necessary," said I, "for you know it quite as well as I do."

She shrugged her shoulders. "You're a good bit of a brute, Armand."

"And you're a——" I began quickly—then stopped.

"Yes?" she inflected. "I am a——?"

"I leave the blank to your own filling," I said, with a bow.

She laughed gayly. "Do you know you have played this scene very nicely, my dear," she said. "If Colonel Bernheim has chanced to stay close

enough to the door, he so neatly slammed ajar, he has heard all that we have said. Though, whether it was by your order or due to his own curiosity, I, of course, do not know. Either way, however, you scored with him."

I was so sure that Bernheim would now be far enough away from the door that I reached across and flung it back.

The ante-room was empty, and, through its open doorway, we could see Bernheim and Moore coming slowly down the corridor and twenty feet away.

But she only laughed again.

"Which simply proves Colonel Bernheim's wonderful agility," she said. "He must be a most valuable Aide."

I closed the door.

"We are drifting from the point," I said. "You did me the honor to request an interview."

"Not exactly, my dear Armand. I sought admittance to my husband."

"By 'husband' you mean——?" I asked.

She smiled tolerantly. "By all means, keep up the play," she said; "but we shall save time and energy by assuming that, whenever I speak of my husband, I mean you."

"I take it, we may also assume that you did not seek such admission to me for the sole pleasure of looking at me?" I said.

"Quite right, Armand; though there was a time—

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and not so long ago—when we both were more than glad to look at each other.—And, maybe, I have not changed.” And she leaned forward and smiled with the frankness of a sweet-faced child.

I made a gesture of repugnance.

“For Heaven’s sake, madame, lay aside this simulated sentiment and be good enough to come to the point.”

“The point?—the point?” she replied absently. “True, I was forgetting—the sight of you, dear, always stirs me so. I came here very angry with you, and, now, I have almost forgiven you.”

I put my finger on the electric button, and Colonel Moore responded.

“Mrs. Spencer desires her carriage,” I said.

She gave him one of her sweetest smiles.

“It’s too bad, Colonel Moore, that I am always imposed upon you when your chief sends me from his august presence;” and she held out her hand to him.

Moore’s bow over it was positively blarneying in its deference.

“It is a great pleasure, I assure you,” he said.

She shook her head at him.

“Rather *double entendre*, Colonel.”

“Madame knows it was not so meant,” was the quick reply.

She gave him a glance of amused indifference; then arose.

“And Your Royal Highness does not wish to hear my particular errand?” she said.

"No more than before you—entered," I replied.

"Intruded, you mean."

"Possibly, that would be more accurate," I admitted.

She gave a sarcastic laugh.

"Your royalty seems to have been fatal to your courtesy."

"At least, there is one particular instance in which it seems to have increased my forbearance."

She gathered up her skirts, as though to go—then turned.

"And that instance is myself?" she asked.

"Your intuition is marvellous," I replied.

She sat down on the chair arm.

"But, why do you forbear, my dear?" she said.

"If I am not your wife, why don't you do something to prove it?"

"What, for example?" I inquired.

She shrugged her shoulders. "How ingenious you are, Armand! You would even have me believe that, having decided to deny me, you did not, also, arrange how to proceed when I appeared."

"My dear Mrs. Spencer, I said, the other night, that you were a great actress; permit me to repeat it."

"It is very easy to act the truth, Armand," she answered.

"And your appearance in Dornlitz is, I suppose, in the interest of truth?" I mocked.

She looked at me very steadily, a moment.

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"At any rate, you must admit it was well for truth and decency that I did appear."

"We but waste each other's time, Mrs. Spencer," I answered curtly, and nodded to Moore.

But she gave no heed to the Aide's proffered arm. She did not even glance at him, but leaned back on the chair, swinging her foot and looking as insolently tantalizing as possible. It was a very pretty pose.

"I may be very stupid, Armand," she said, "but, I cannot understand why, if my presence in Dornlitz is so annoying to you, you prevent me leaving it."

I smiled. "At last," said I, "we are coming to the point."

"As though you hadn't guessed it from the first," she laughed.

"Unfortunately, I have not Mrs. Spencer's keenness of intuition," I returned.

She glanced over at my desk.

"The Governor of Dornlitz needs none. Official reports are better than intuition."

"But not so rapid," I replied.

She smiled. "I was looking at the telephone," she said dryly.

"An admirable medium for unpleasant conversations," I observed.

"Particularly, between husband and wife, you mean."

I answered with a shrug.

"And, also, between the city gates and headquarters," she continued.

"You are pleased to speak in riddles," I said.

She let herself sink, with sinuous grace, into the chair.

I sighed, with suggestive audibility, and waited.

It was a good deal of a cat and dog business—and the cat was having all the fun—and knew it.

I could not well have her dragged from the room; and the other alternative—to leave, myself—was not to my taste. It looked too much like flight.

"I wish you would explain why I am not permitted to leave Dornlitz," she said.

"Have you been restrained from leaving?" I asked.

"Still pretending ignorance, my dear," she laughed. "Well, then, I was refused exit at the North gate this morning; and that, though I was only going for a short drive in the country."

"Why didn't you try another gate?" I asked.

"I did—three others."

"With similar results?"

"Absolutely."

"Therefore, you inferred?" I asked.

"Nothing, my dear Armand, nothing. I know. At one of the gates, the officer condescended to tell me that he was acting under the express order of Field Marshal, His Royal Highness the Governor of Dornlitz."

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"And he told you the truth," I said.

"Of course he did," she laughed. "I never doubted it. What I want to know is your reason for the order."

"And that is what brought you here?" I asked.

"That—and the pleasure of seeing my dear husband," she drawled.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Mrs. Spencer," I said: "My motive for the order, in exchange, in strict confidence, for your motive for coming to Dornlitz."

Of course, I had no notion she would disclose the actual motive in the plot. What I was after was the story they had prepared to explain why I came to Valeria alone and left her to follow and, in the interim, posed as a bachelor.

"Surely, Armand, you're not serious!" she exclaimed.

"I never was more so," I said.

"But why should you want me to tell you something you already know?" she asked—with a quick glance at Moore.

"Come, come!" said I; "Colonel Moore is totally deaf, at times. I promise your secret shall remain within this room."

"My secret!" she laughed. "Really, Armand, you are delicious."

"I don't quite understand," I said.

She laughed again. "It seems to me that why I followed you to Valeria, instead of coming with you,

is, particularly, your secret. You wouldn't care for His Majesty to know it, would you?"

"If it's my secret," said I, "don't you think I ought to be let into it?"

She thought a moment—evidently considering how much she should reveal to me. Of course, she understood what I wanted and why; but this order of mine, restricting her within the Capital, had evidently been totally unexpected, and she was set upon having some explanation of it. Hence, she was ready to bargain.

"Come!" said I. "In this game you're playing, you will have to disclose it very soon, anyway."

"But, it seems so silly, Armand, to tell you what you yourself arranged."

"Oh! So I arranged for your coming!" I exclaimed. "I suppose I also arranged for what you have done since you've been here."

She smiled sweetly. "Not quite all, my dear. I've been arranging a few things myself, thanks to your perfidy."

"We are getting away from the main point," I said. "You were about to tell me why you came to Dornlitz."

She arose languidly, and began to draw on her gloves.

"Oh, was I? Well, then, I've changed my mind."

"I bid you good-day, Mrs. Spencer," I said, and turned away.

She gave a light laugh. "Aren't you glad to be rid of me, dear?"

I faced about.

"Very," I said bluntly.

She put out a hand, as though to ward off a blow, and her face flushed, an instant.

"Armand, my dear——" she began.

I turned my back and walked toward the window.

Then, there came the rustle of silk behind me—a soft arm was flung about my neck, and a tear-choked voice exclaimed:

"Haven't you one kind word for me, dear?"

I reached up and put her arm sharply aside.

"It seems to me, madame, there has been enough of this nonsense," I said. "There is no gallery here to play to, as you had in the Hanging Garden."

She studied my face a moment—drawing her tiny lace handkerchief nervously from hand to hand.

"I must ask you to leave my office immediately," I went on. "If you decline, I shall leave and not return until you have gone."

She slowly drew herself up, and stepped back.

"And this is your last word to your wife?" she asked.

"It is my last word to you, Mrs. Spencer," I said curtly. "Are you going—or shall I?"

She swept me a bit of a courtesy, smiling the while.

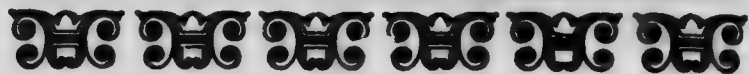
"I am going, my dear Armand, I am going—but it is only *au revoir*."

I bowed stiffly, and motioned to Moore to escort her.

He swung open the door—then stopped short. Just entering the ante-room, from the corridor, were the King, the Princess Royal, and the American Ambassador.

Instantly, Mrs. Spencer drew back, and gave me a mocking smile.

"I've changed my mind again, dear," she said. "I'll make that trade of motives, now."



XVIII

ANOTHER ACT IN THE PLAY

I HASTENED to the door, saluted the King, and greeted the Princess and Courtney.

"I am honored over much," I said—then watched their actions, as they saw Mrs. Spencer.

Frederick stopped short, frowned, then turned to me interrogatingly. Courtney raised his eyebrows, bowed to Mrs. Spencer, and, then, gave me a quizzical smile. Dehra flouted her enemy with one of those deliberately ignoring stares; then, she smiled at me, and went over and sat down at my desk.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Spencer stood near the table; one hand resting on it, the other holding up her gown. The attitude was most becoming and effective—and she knew it. So far as her bearing showed, the situation was the most natural imaginable. And, chancing to catch my eye, she actually gave me her most fetching smile.

She got a stare in answer, and I turned to the King.

"I have told Your Majesty of a Mrs. Spencer, who claims to be my wife," I said. "She has sought an audience with the Governor of Dornlitz, and de-

manded to know why orders have been issued that she be refused exit from the city. I offered to explain, if she, on her part, would disclose her reasons for coming to Valeria. She refused, and was about to depart, when, seeing Your Majesty, she suddenly changed her mind and agreed to bargain. Have we your permission to proceed?"

The King understood the situation, instantly—and I could detect a bit of a smile under his grey moustache.

"Be seated, madame," he said. "I am interested—unless, of course, you do not care for us to hear it."

She dropped him a wonderful courtesy—acquired, doubtless, in her French Convent school.

"Your Majesty is more than welcome to every word of my story," she answered, with ready frankness. "The Grand Duke Armand knows it quite as well as I; though he affects otherwise, because it pleases him to pretend that I am not his wife."

"My dear madame," the King said, "you are not to tell *me* anything. You are simply graciously permitting me to be present when you carry out the bargain you have just made with the Governor of Dornlitz."

She smiled very sweetly at the King; then, turned to me.

"Will you begin, Armand," she said.

I bowed. "After you, madame," said I. "And, perchance, when I have heard your story, I may revoke the order."

She smiled disdainfully — then, addressed the King:

"I consented to this exchange only because Your Majesty would, thus, hear at least some truth as to this marriage. I confess, however, I am surprised that Major Dalberg permits it to be disclosed."

She turned to me with affected hesitation.

"Are you quite sure, Armand, you really want me to tell it?" she asked.

I laughed. "You play it very cleverly, Mrs. Spencer," I said.

She shrugged her shoulders most expressively.

"On your head be it, then," she answered. Then, addressing the King, she went on. "When it was determined that Major Dalberg was to be the American Military Attaché with the Valerian Army, he told me, for the first time, of his kinship to Your Majesty. On my insistent urging, he then decided to make a bid for your favor, to the end that you might acknowledge his birth and restore to him the lost estates and titles of his ancestor, Prince Hugo. Apprehending, however, that Your Majesty would look with more kindness upon him as a bachelor than as a married man, it was arranged that I should remain in America. Then, as soon as the scheme had either succeeded or definitely failed, I was to be sent for." She turned and looked at me. "It is rather needless to say—in view of Monsieur Armand's present attitude toward me—that he never sent for me. But I saw the accounts, in the daily Press, of

the wonderful story of an American Army Officer, Armand Dalberg, being, in truth, a Prince of Valeria; and how he had been so accepted and proclaimed by the King. I waited two weeks and more—for word from my husband—then I came hither—and met the kind reception he gave me in the Hanging Garden.”

She paused an instant; then spoke to me:

“Is there anything material that I have omitted?” she asked.

“Naturally, I do not know, Mrs. Spencer,” I answered; “but, judging from your marvellous power of—invention, I should fancy not.”

She turned aside the thrust with a smile.

“The bargain is, now, with you, monsieur,” she said. “I await the explanation of your order.”

“It is very simple, Mrs. Spencer,” I said curtly; “so simple, indeed, I am quite sure you guessed it, long ago.”

Her smile still lingered.

“The bargain, sir, the bargain!”

“I issued the order, madame, because you have falsely proclaimed yourself my wife, and I intend to confine your acting as such within the limits of this town. So long as you pose as my wife you will never pass the gates of Dornlitz.”

“In other words, I am to be prisoner for life,” she said.

“That is for you to determine,” I answered.

She studied my face, a bit.

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"I suppose you want me to consent to a divorce," she said.

"Divorce implies marriage," I answered.

She shook her head and smiled tolerantly.

"I really can't promise to die just to accommodate Your Highness," she said.

I made no reply.

"And that suggests the inquiry, Your Majesty," she said; "as the wife of the Prince Armand am I not a Grand Duchess of Valeria and a Royal Highness?"

Surely, the woman's impudence was almost beyond belief!

But the King was very courteous.

"The Decree of Restoration applies only to the Grand Duke Armand," he said.

"And I remain, simply, Mrs. Armand Dalberg?" she asked.

Frederick smiled.

"You remain exactly what you were before the Decree was signed," he said.

She turned to me.

"Since I am to live in Dornlitz the rest of my days, where is it your gracious purpose that I reside—in the Epsau Palace or where?"

"Except to assure you it will not be in the Epsau, it is no concern of mine where you live," I answered.

"Then, it will be the Hotel Metzen—and, of course, the bill will be sent to you."

"Oh, no, it won't," I answered.

"Surely!" she exclaimed, "you can't intend to hold

me prisoner, and, then, oblige me to provide my own subsistence."

"Your subsistence, Mrs. Spencer, is not my affair," I said, "since the length of your enforced detention in Dornlitz is optional with yourself."

"You mean?"

"I mean, that when you admit I am not and never was your husband, and that the marriage certificate is false, that instant you are free to depart."

She shook her head.

"I am willing to permit you to obtain a divorce," she said, "but I may not deny the truth of the certificate."

"Very good," said I. "I trust you will enjoy your stay in Dornlitz."

She swung around toward Courtney.

"You are the American Ambassador, are you not, monsieur?" she said.

Courtney answered by a bow.

"Then, I ask if you will suffer an American citizen to be kept prisoner by the Valerian authorities without trial or legal judgment?"

"Not for a moment, madame," said Courtney, instantly, and with a quick smile at the King.

"You would protest?"

"Most strenuously—and so would Washington."

She looked at me with a triumphant sneer.

"You hear, Your Highness!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said I, "I hear."

"I presume I am now at liberty to depart."

"From the room?—undoubtedly," I answered.

"Thank you—I mean from Dornlitz."

"Whenever you will," said I; "on the terms I gave you."

She turned, again, to Courtney.

"I appeal to Your Excellency for protection."

"Upon what basis, madame?" he asked formally.

She looked surprised.

"As an American subject," she said.

"And under what name?" Courtney asked.

"My rightful one, of course," she laughed:
"Madeline Dalberg."

"Wife of the Grand Duke Armand?" he went on.

"Surely, monsieur—who else?"

"That, madame, if you will pardon, is the material point. As wife of a Valerian Prince you are a subject of His Majesty, Frederick the Third, and the American Government has no jurisdiction to interfere."

"But, His Majesty has just said I was not comprehended in the Decree restoring my husband," she objected.

"Of course, I can speak only according to the doctrine of the United States," said Courtney. "It asks only if you are the wife of a foreigner. If you are, then, his citizenship determines yours."

She gave Courtney a sarcastic smile, and addressed the King.

"Will Your Majesty tell me wherein the Valerian doctrine differs from the American?" she asked.

"It is precisely similar," said Frederick.

She leaned forward. "Then, though not an Archduchess, I am, nevertheless, a subject of Your Majesty," she said.

The King frowned. "My dear madame," he said, "questions of citizenship are not presented to me, originally. They are passed upon by the proper Department of my Government and reach me, only, in case of peculiarly extraordinary circumstances."

She arose, and went close over to the King.

"Your Majesty has heard me appeal for protection to the Ambassador of my native land and be refused, because I was no longer an American citizen," she began. "And you, yourself, have practically admitted he was correct, and that I am a Valerian subject. Therefore, I demand that freedom of action which is granted to all your citizens, and that the order of the Governor of Dornlitz be revoked."

Frederick looked at her sternly for a moment.

"Pray be seated, madame," he said; "and permit me to observe that, if you are my subject, your manner of address is scarcely respectful to your King."

"I do not desire to be disrespectful," she replied; "but, if I am your subject, I have the undoubted right to the protection of your laws. I ask Your Majesty if I am receiving that protection? I ask Your Majesty if those laws permit one, unaccused of any crime or wrong-doing, to be held prisoner

within the limits of a town? I ask Your Majesty if those laws sanction such an order as your Governor, yonder, has made respecting me?"

There was just the proper touch of dignified indignation and feminine pathos. Indeed, I never saw this rather remarkable woman act her part better than in that short speech.

The King looked at her, for a bit, in silence—though, whether he was admiring her as a beautiful woman or as an artistic impersonator, I could not make out. Doubtless, it was something of both.

"As simple abstract propositions, my dear madame," he said, presently, "your questions, as put, are entitled to negative replies. But, when they are applied to the actual facts in the case, as just given by you, there is a vast difference. If you are the lawfully wedded wife of the Grand Duke Armand, there is nothing illegal in the order you complain of. In Valeria, the husband has lawful authority, upon proper cause, to restrain his wife within even smaller limits than are prescribed for you."

"But, where, in my case, is there any proper cause?" she demanded. "Besides, he avers I am not his wife—therefore, he can have no authority over me."

The King smiled. "My dear madame, you forget that it is you who insist upon submitting yourself to his authority."

"That may be, Sire; yet, I appeal to your sense of

fairness. Should he be permitted to exercise a husband's authority to imprison me, and, at the same time, deny that he is my husband?"

Of course, theoretically, she was in the right. My action was, in that particular, utterly inconsistent with my position and protestations. For a moment, I was a trifle uneasy as to the King's answer.

But he brushed it lightly aside.

"The circumstances of the case are so extraordinary, madame, that I fear it cannot well be judged by the usual standard."

She smiled very sweetly. "Which means that I am to be held to the strict obligations of my position, but that the Grand Duke Armand can perpetrate any inconsistency he choose."

The King smiled back at her. "I do not doubt that His Royal Highness will be most happy to be relieved of the necessity for being inconsistent," he said.

"Good!" she exclaimed. "I am ready to leave Dornlitz and Valeria this very day."

The King turned to me, interrogatingly.

"Then, you admit you are not Madeline Dalberg?" I asked.

"On the contrary, I re-affirm it; but, I offer you a divorce."

I shrugged my shoulders and made no reply.

"You see, Sire," she said, "how reasonable he is. He condescends to be consistent only if, by forcing me to perjure myself, he can further his—

schemes"—and she deliberately turned and looked at the Princess.

I stepped quickly between them.

She laughed scornfully.

"How like you, Armand," she said. "It's only a short while since you were just as thoughtful for me."

I was too angry to reply, but she could read my thoughts in my eyes. And she answered them with a taunting smile and a toss of her head.

So there was silence, for a space; then, she spoke to Courtney:

"I understand, Your Excellency refuses me your protection because I am a Valerian subject?"

Courtney bowed.

"Made so by your own statements," he answered.

"And Your Majesty refuses to interfere between the Governor of Dornlitz and me, because, as his wife, I am subject to his authority?"

"In effect, yes," said Frederick.

"And you, my Lord Armand, declare that I am not your wife and, therefore, that I am an American subject?"

"I think, Mrs. Spencer, we have gone over that matter *ad nauseam*," I said.

"I grant you the nauseousness," she retorted.

"A bare-faced lie may not be over chary as to the defence it provokes," I answered.

She gathered up her skirts, and turned toward the door.

"What a pretty sight you three are," she sneered. "A King, an Ambassador and a Royal Archduke playing with one poor woman like cats with a mouse. Truly, sirs, you should have lived three hundred years ago. You would have shown rare skill in the torture chambers of the Holy Inquisition."

"'Pon my soul, madame!" Frederick exclaimed, "I'm glad to hear a frank opinion of myself. It's a privilege that rarely comes to a King."

"More's the pity for the King," she replied. "And more's the shame for his selfish advisers," and she looked at Courtney, and, then, at me.

"Have I Your Majesty's permission to depart—to my hotel?" she ended.

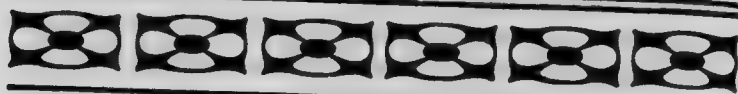
The King nodded, without replying.

She swept him another of those wonderful curtseys; then turned to Moore, who swung back the door for her.

At the threshold she looked back and smiled at me.

"*Au revoir*, Armand, dear, *au revoir*," she said almost caressingly; "you will come back to me soon, I know."

Before I could frame an answer she was gone.



XIX

MY COUSIN, THE DUKE

FOR the next few weeks, matters went along without any particular incident. The snarl, in which I was entangled, showed no signs of unravelling, and my marriage to the Princess and the Royal succession seemed farther away than ever.

The investigations, in the United States, had yielded nothing of any utility. Indeed, they had been practically barren, for they had told me little more than Courtney's cablegram.

Edwards, the witness named in the certificate, had not been located, though New York had been scraped as with a fine-tooth comb; so, it was safe to assume his existence was only on paper and in Alderman McGuire's brain.

The movements of Madeline Spencer had been very difficult to trace, as was entirely natural—for what hotel servant would remember, weeks after, the doings of a woman guest, whose life had been at all regular. All that could be ascertained, definitely, was that she had sailed from New York ten days prior to her arrival at Dornlitz; and that she had registered as Mrs. Armand Dalberg at the Waldorf

a week before sailing; her luggage having been checked there from Philadelphia. The floor-clerk and some of the pages recalled her very readily, and were rather positive that they had not seen any foreigner with her, who resembled a Valerian.

That was about the extent of the detectives' discoveries; for Philadelphia yielded absolutely nothing, beyond the fact that she had been at one of the Broad Street hotels, for a fortnight, prior to coming to New York; and, before that, in Pittsburgh, Washington, and New York; the last corresponding, in date, to my interview with her, there, in December. At none of these places, could any traces be discovered of an emissary of Lotzen.

Nor did the investigations at this end, conducted for me by Courtney's secret agents, yield anything more satisfactory. During the period, in question, the Duke had not been away from the Capital for over three days at any one time, and none of his suite had been absent longer than a week. Nevertheless, I was none the less positive that there had been some sort of communication between Madeline Spencer, in America, and the Duke of Lotzen, in Valeria, in response to which she was here.

So, it seemed Courtney was correct, as usual. He had predicted that nothing would be found by the detectives; because, as he said, it was just a case in which all tracks would be most effectively covered by doing everything in the most ordinary way—and, apparently, that was just what had been done.

There seemed to be nothing but to cultivate patience and settle down to wait for someone to blunder, or for the lady to get tired of her enforced residence in Dornlitz, and begin to get restless, and do something which would give us a clue to work on.

She had retained her apartments at the Hotel Metzen—the management having, however, addressed me as to my pleasure, in the matter—and, at least, once every day, she had sought to pass some one of the City gates; and, when refused, would then demand exit as the wife of the Grand Duke Armand.

She drove and rode and walked about the town the cynosure of all eyes—and some of them of admiring men, who would have been very ready, doubtless, to start a flirtation; both for their own pleasure and in the hope of gaining my good will by discrediting her.

But, she would have none of them, and went her way with the serene blindness of an honest woman.

In the hotel, she bore herself with the quiet dignity and reserve suitable to her assumed position. With the guests, particularly Americans, she was frankly gracious and friendly; but, it was evident, she sought no sympathy and wanted no confidants.

All these details came to me in the reports of the Secret Police. I saw her very frequently on the street; passing her both on the sidewalk and on horseback. And if she were pining for the newly wedded husband, who had forsaken and denied her,

she most assuredly did not show it. Nor did her impudence diminish. Whenever she saw me she tried to catch my eye. Several times it happened she was watching me when I first observed her; then, like a flash, she would bow and smile with the air of the most intimate camaraderie.

Of course, I pointedly ignored her, but it had no effect; for the next time her greeting was only the more effusively intimate. Naturally, the people stared. I felt sure they winked at one another knowingly, when my back was turned. The whole situation was intensely irritating and growing more so every day; and my patience, never long at best, must have been a trifle uncertain for those around me.

I think I am not an unjust man, by nature; but some provocations would make even the best tempers quick and squally. And, then, what is the good of being an Archduke, if one may not flare out occasionally!

I was a bit lonely, too. The King was in the North and the Princess was with him—and so, for a time, was Lotzen, I happened to know; though I understood he had, now, left them and was returning to Dornlitz. I wished him a long journey and a slow one.

His suave courtesy was becoming unbearable; and my sorest trial was to receive it calmly and to meet it in kind. Truly, if he had found a brilliant leading woman in Madeline Spencer, he had an equally brilliant leading man in himself.

I was no possible match for him; and I could feel the sneer behind his smile. I wanted to give him a good body beating—and I was sure he knew it, and that it only amused him. I could, now, quite understand the rage which makes a man walk up to another and smash him in the face without a word of preliminary. I would have given five years of life to do that to Lotzen.

And, instead, I had to smile—and smile—and smile. Bah! it makes me shiver.

He must have fancied I wished him a long absence, for he returned with astonishing promptness. I saw him the next afternoon in the Officers' Club—and our greeting was almost effusive. In fact, if anything were required to prove how intensely we despised each other, this demonstrative cordiality supplied it. It was so hollow it fairly resounded with derision.

"I'll ride over to Headquarters with you," he said.

"I'm walking," I answered.

"Good, I'll walk, too," he replied.

So, we set out—the orderly following with the Duke's horse.

"When did you come in?" I asked—knowing perfectly well the very hour of his arrival.

"Last night, on the Express from the North," he answered—knowing that I already knew it.

"Had a good time, of course?" I remarked.

"Delightful—we wished for you."

"It's astonishing how kind you all are to the stranger," I said.

He shot a quick glance at me.

"We don't regard you as a stranger, my dear cousin," he protested.

"I believe you," said I. "Judged by the way His Majesty and the Princess, and you have treated me, the heir of Hugo might never have lived beyond the Kingdom."

This brought another look.

"The Dalbergs don't do things by halves," he answered.

"So I have noticed, cousin. I only trust I can live up to it."

He laughed. "You promise very well, Armand, very well, indeed."

"I am glad," I answered.

When we reached Headquarters, I suggested that he come up to my office and smoke a cigar. I thought he would decline. But, there, I erred.

"Thanks," said he, "I'll join you as soon as I've registered," and he turned down the corridor toward the Adjutant General's office.

On my desk was a wire from the Princess. She and the King would reach Dornlitz the next morning and I was expected to lunch at the Palace. I dispatched an answer that would meet the Royal train en route, and thought of Lotzen with indifference—almost.

When he came, I was going through a batch of

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papers which had just been brought in for my signature.

"Don't let me disturb you," he said heartily. "Finish the miserable red tape."

I nodded.

He chose a cigar and, having lighted it, with the careful attention he seemed to give to the smallest matters, he sauntered to the window that overlooked the Avenue.

Presently, he glanced around at me.

I went on with my work.

Then he glanced again.

I signed the last of the papers, pushed them aside and arose.

"Mrs. Spencer is about to pass," he said.

"I trust so," said I. "I'm sure I've no desire for her to stop."

Then, suddenly, he frowned—and made a short bow.

"She had the impudence to speak to me," he said.

I smiled and made no comment. For the life of me, I could not determine if his surprise were natural or assumed.

He crossed to a front window and watched her out of sight.

"There is no discounting her beauty," he remarked.

I was silent.

He came over, and dropped into a chair on the

other side of the table. It was just where Mrs. Spencer had sat, and, so, a very fit place for him.

"She must be a most extraordinary woman," he observed.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Yet, what I can't understand, is what she hopes to gain by masquerading, here, as your wife."

I looked at him and waited. He was steering into strange waters, it seemed to me.

"Now, if she had done it in Paris, or Vienna, or any place outside of Valeria," he went on, "one could see the temporary profit of it. But, to come to Dornlitz and dare it under your very nose!"—he flung up his hands. "She is a bit too much for me!"

I saw his drift, now. He wanted to know if I suspected him; and, to that end, was quite willing to match his wit against mine. His contempt for my discernment was not, especially, flattering; but, sometimes, it does no harm to be taken for a fool—if one is not. And I was conceited enough to consider myself the latter. Which, however, may only have proven that Lotzen was right.

"And for me, too, at present," I answered.

"At present?" he echoed, blowing a succession of smoke rings and watching them float away.

I nodded. "She will get tired of the game, presently, and quit."

"She has stuck to it rather persistently," he observed; "and crossed the seas to play it."

"Yes," said I, "she did just that; yet she is none the less liable to quit abruptly to-morrow."

That would interest him, I thought. It did.

"You are judging from experience?" he asked, rather quickly.

"I've known the lady for a few years," I laughed, "and I've yet to find her true either to herself or to the hand that paid her."

It was characteristic of the man that, at these last words, he made no quick glance at my face. Instead, he studied the end of his cigar. When he did look at me, it was in the perfectly natural way of asking a question.

Then I got a start. He suddenly struck straight from the shoulder.

"By 'the hand that paid her,' you mean?" he asked—and now, his eyes were fairly drilling into mine.

I took on a look of surprise.

"What does it usually mean?" I answered with a bit of a shrug.

He either had to appear to accept the inference in this answer or else ask me blankly if I meant that Mrs. Spencer was in his employ. He chose the former.

"It is very difficult to associate such a beautiful woman with the *demi-monde*," he said.

"Yet, Saint Anthony would stand no chance with her."

He looked at me with an amused smile.

"I assume you lay no claims to even ordinary sainthood?"

"None, whatever, my dear Duke."

"Possibly, you avoided situations which might put you to the test?"

"Possibly," I laughed.

"You are more of a Saint than you imagine," he answered.

I shook my head.

"Colonel Spencer was my friend," I said.

"And his wife—and widow would have been—yours—and you would not; *n'est ce pas?*"

I smiled.

"So, that's the motive for it, is it. 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,'" he quoted. It was meant as a question, however.

I appeared to hesitate.

"Revenge, sometimes, does take queer forms," I said tentatively.

"And you, too, think this is revenge?" he asked.

"What other motive could she have?" I answered.

He closed his eyes, a moment; lest, I suppose, his amused contempt would shine out so plainly that even stupid I would see it. He was sure, now, he had been right in deeming me too heavy-witted to suspect him.

"It might be blackmail," he suggested.

"Then, she is a very long time in naming her price," I replied.

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"True; but, maybe, she is enjoying Dornlitz," he laughed.

I laughed, too.

"It's none of my business, of course, Armand," he went on "but, why don't you run her out of the Kingdom, instead of keeping her in by force."

"I'm waiting for her to get tired of the game and quit."

He thought a bit

"Maybe, I can help you," he said.

I had not Lotzen's gift of imperturbability but I did my best not to show my surprise.

"You are very kind," I answered; "though I don't see what you can do."

"I may take it you have no particular—regard for the lady?" he asked.

"Indeed, you may!"

"So you would have no objection to someone making a—try at her?"

"None whatever, I assure you. As many some-ones and as many tries as you wish—and may they all win."

"Now, you're a trifle too generous," said he. "I've taken rather a shy at her myself and—you understand?"

I thought I did—but not as he meant me to. What he wanted was liberty to communicate, at will, directly with the lady, without arousing suspicion or seeming to side against me.

I shut one eye, and looked at him as though in sly comprehension.

"But, how will that help me?" I asked.

"In this way," said he. "You think she is tired of her game and about ready to quit. I come along; and she tosses you over and seizes the new prey. I'll tell her plainly she cannot have me so long as there is any question about her being your wife."

"But, won't it raise a nasty scandal?" I objected.

"Not a bit," he said, with a knowing smile. "We have ways to do such things, you know. I have a Chateau near the French Border—the lady leaves for Paris—and goes by way of the Chateau. *Comprenez vous?*"

I wanted to laugh in his face. What a charming scheme to get Mrs. Spencer out of the Kingdom!

"But, suppose," said I, "she cuts the Chateau and keeps right on to Paris?"

"Trust me, my dear Marshal, she won't cut the Chateau. I shall be with her when she leaves Dornlitz."

"I know the lady," said I. "I'm afraid to risk it."

He tossed aside his cigar and lit a fresh one.

"Very well, cousin," he said, with an air of good-natured indifference. "It's your affair, of course. I only wanted to aid you in any way I could. You're the best judge, however, how to handle the matter. If you need me, I am yours to command."

"My dear Duke," I said, "I realize your friendly

spirit and I want you to know I appreciate it; and I shall not hesitate to call on you if the occasion arise."

He flung his cape around him and hooked up his sword.

"And, in the meantime, do I understand that I am to keep severely away from the lady?"

I hesitated. Of course his point was to obtain from me direct authority for him to visit her. The very fact that he wanted it was a sufficient reason for refusing; but, on the other hand, so long as he thought himself unsuspected, it might not be a bad move to give him the opportunity. It would increase the chances for them to make a blunder. I determined to risk it.

"The only restriction, touching Mrs. Spencer, is the order of the Military Governor," I answered. "If you can induce her to acknowledge the falsity of that certificate, she shall be free to resume her journey to the Devil, *via* your Chateau, and joy go with her."

He flung back his head and laughed heartily.

"A trifle hard on my Chateau, cousin, to locate it on the road to Hell. But we will let it pass. For, between us, it is a good road and an easy; and they, who travel it, are a finer lot than the superstitious dreamers who grope, in darkness, along the bleak and stony path they fancy leads upward to the Light."

"You mistook my meaning," I said. "It's not for me to criticise another's chosen road, whether it be the rough one or the smooth. There are no hand

boards at the forking, and only a blind fall at the end of each. It's all a guess; and, so far as I know, one road is as good as another."

He looked at me, rather curiously. "Which road do you travel, cousin?" he asked.

"Neither, by intention," I answered. "I am still at the Forks."

He laughed, rather sarcastically. "Well, when you leave them, if you chance to come my way, the Chateau is at your disposal. Meanwhile, I'll endeavor to steer Madame Spencer, alias Dalberg, toward it."

I could feel the deliberate sneer, but it was too well veiled to resent, openly.

"At least, don't expect me as a guest while she is there," I replied.

"I don't imagine I would want you, then," said he. He went over to the door; then returned and, leaning on the back of a chair, looked at me thoughtfully.

"What now?" I wondered—and waited.

"There is a matter, cousin," he began, "which has been on my mind lately—and this may be as good a time as any to take it up."

I nodded. "Go ahead—we are in the humor for confidences, this afternoon, it seems."

"And for plain speaking?" he asked.

"Between men I'm always for that," said I. "It's the safest in the end."

"Exactly my opinion. I am glad to have one of

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your experience and discretion agree with it," he answered.

It seemed to give him the keenest pleasure to sneer at me, to my very face, with compliments he thought I would take seriously. And, in truth, I think I was beginning to enjoy it as much as he.

"You are a bit old for your age, my dear Duke," I said.

"But I have much to learn," he said modestly.

"It will all come in time, cousin," I answered patronizingly.

He dropped his head an instant—to hide his smiles, I knew.

"A charming afternoon," he said. "Confidences—compliments—and plain speaking. We are making rare progress, cousin mine."

"And, why not?" I asked.

"Surely," he exclaimed, heartily, "surely—why not?" Then he paused. "And, now, for the plain speaking."

"Good," said I; "drive ahead; and make it as plain as you like."

"I'll do it," he said. "What I want to know is: First—do you intend to try to displace me in the Line of Succession? And, second—are you a suitor for the hand of the Princess Royal?"

It would have been impossible to hide my surprise, so I made no effort. Surely, this man's methods were almost beyond comprehension!

"My dear Duke," I replied, "your questions are

plain, and a plain answer will do for both—it is none of your business.”

He laughed. “By which I infer you decline to answer.”

“Precisely!”

He tossed away his cigar and slowly lit another.

“Of course, Armand, that is your privilege; but, then, you must pardon the further inference that to decline to answer is, really, to answer in the affirmative.”

“You are responsible for your inferences, not I,” I replied curtly.

He leaned a bit forward. “Let us take up my first question,” he said. “Have you ever considered what you were likely to encounter if you undertook to filch the Crown?”

“Filch?” I interrupted.

“Steal, then, if you prefer. I forgot we were to use plain terms.”

“Very true,” said I. “Proceed.”

“Do you think that I, who have been the Heir Presumptive since the instant of my birth, almost, will calmly step aside and permit you to take my place?”

I looked at him, indifferently, and made no answer.

“Do you fancy, for an instant,” he went on, “that the people of Valeria would have a foreigner for King?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

"And even if old Frederick were to become so infatuated with you that he would restore you to Hugo's place in the Line of Succession, do you imagine, that the House of Nobles would hesitate to annul it the instant he died?"

From the written words, one might well infer that he spoke loudly and in open anger; whereas, in fact, his face was smiling and his voice was even more soft than usual. It behooved me to meet him in kind.

"As you seem to have been doing my thinking, cousin, perhaps you have also thought out my answers. If you have, I shall be glad to hear them; it will save me the labor of thinking them out for myself."

His smile broadened. "The only labor I can promise to save you, cousin, is that of being King."

"I fear it is a bit early for me to choose my Prime Minister," I said.

His smile became a laugh. "Let us pass to my second question. It, however, demands no thinking. There is ample evidence of your intention as to the Princess."

"Then, why ask it?" I inquired.

"Because, of her intention toward you, I am not so sure—but, women are queer creatures and prone to take queer crotchets. You aim to marry her; and so, having won the King and stolen my birth-right, to use her popularity to secure you on the Throne. You see, all roads lead to the Throne."

"All roads which His Highness of Lotzen travels," I observed.

He tilted back the chair; then let it drop sharply forward to the floor.

"Just so, cousin, just so," he said.

"And one of those roads passes by your Chateau?" I asked.

For an instant, he seemed to suspect my true meaning, and I regretted the word. Then the suspicion faded and he accepted them at their face value.

"Morals have nothing to do with a King," he laughed; "nor with the subject under consideration."

"Apropos of the latter," said I, "I suppose I am very stupid, but I don't quite understand why, if you feel so about the Princess, you offered to aid me in getting rid of Mrs. Spencer."

"Pure selfishness, cousin. I have taken a liking to the Lady, myself."

"Then, at least, I may thank you for your selfishness," I sneered.

He smiled; then turned and looked at the clock on the mantel behind him.

"Come, Armand," he said, "I must be going. Will you condescend to answer?"

I arose.

"You won't? Well, it's not really necessary—but, have you a dice box handy?"

"I have not."

"A pack of cards, then?"

"No."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Take my advice and get them—you are far, very far, out of the fashion, cousin mine. However, this will serve, though it's rather low class," and he took out a gold coin and rang it on the table. "You were an American officer and, I understand, they are as game a lot of men as wear swords. Will you bear that out and try a toss with me?"

"And the wager?" I asked.

He slowly drew the chair backward; but, instead of dropping it with a crash, he leaned far over it toward me and said, very slowly.

"Two tosses and two wagers. The first, for the Princess; the second, for the Crown."

I waited a moment until I could control my voice.

"It will give me the most intense pleasure, my dear Duke," said I, "to toss you—not with yonder coin but out of yonder window. I fancy a second toss would not be necessary; but, if it were, I could do it with as much pleasure as the first."

Lotzen's face got crimson; then, gradually paled—like red-hot iron passing to a white heat. He let the chair fall slowly into place; and so easily that I could not hear the feet strike the floor.

So, for a space, we stood at gaze. Then he spoke; and I marvelled at the continued calmness of his voice.

"You are my superior officer, so I may not strike you nor draw against you. But you will, I trust,

pardon me, my dear cousin, if I tell you that you are a snivelling coward."

"Pray, don't hide behind my temporary rank," I answered hotly. "I waive it, gladly. Anything, for a chance to puncture that rotten carcass of yours or to get a good fair crack at your smooth face."

It was a foolish speech. I knew it the moment it was out. But I never had acquired self-restraint when aggravated by those I disliked—and I despised Lotzen. Possibly, he had far better ground for despising me. Had our positions been reversed, I am quite sure I would have viewed him much as he did me—a foreigner—an interloper—a scheming usurper—a thief.

My explosion seemed to calm the Duke. He looked at me, intently, for a moment; then bowed gravely.

"I beg Your Highness's pardon," he said; "you are not a coward."

I might not be outdone, so I bowed back at him. "Thank you," said I; "and I also beg your pardon and withdraw my adjectives."

"*Merci*, Your Highness," he answered. "Let us consider the matter closed?"

"With pleasure," said I.

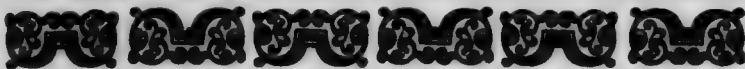
"And I shall hope to have the honor of crossing swords—foils, I mean, with you, some day," he said meaningly.

"The hope is intensely mutual, my dear Duke," I answered.

He drew himself up to attention and saluted stiffly. I returned it in kind.

"And, with Your Highness's permission," I said, "I shall ask you to refrain from communicating with Mrs. Spencer. I appreciate your offer but, upon second thought, I doubt the wisdom of it."

"As you wish, monsieur," said he; "as you wish."



XX

A TRICK OF FENCE

AFTER Lotzen had gone, and I was able to do a bit of reflecting, I was pretty well convinced that he had got about as much out of me as I had out of him. Of course, our mutual distrust and dislike were now openly avowed; but we had known it quite as well before—just as he had been aware of my designs on the Crown and my partiality for the Princess, and, I, of his purpose to defeat me for both. He had, to use a military term, made a reconnoissance in force; and I had tried to meet him in kind and to prevent him uncovering my exact position. How well I had succeeded, however, was very problematical; for I could not know what particular information he sought. I was satisfied, however, his main purpose was to discover whither I had any knowledge or suspicion of him being back of Madeline Spencer. And I was not so sure I had bluffed him. I began to fancy he had seen through me, at once, and had played me off against myself, so to speak. And, the longer I meditated, the more the fancy gripped me. Finally, in disgust, I summoned Bernheim and Moore.

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"Which of you," said I, "will do me the favor of a few passes with the foils?"

Of course, they both offered.

"Good," said I; "I'll take you, in turn. Send an orderly to the armory for the paraphernalia."

I fell to divesting myself of my upper garments, and Bernheim and Moore followed suit.

"By the way," I said, "what sort of a fencer is Lotzen?"

Bernheim turned and looked at me, sharply. Moore stopped with his shirt half off and did the same.

"There is only one better in Valeria," said Bernheim.

"So!" said I. "And he?"

The grey eyes twinkled and he actually smiled as he answered.

"Colonel Moore, of Your Highness's Personal Staff."

It was my turn to be surprised. "Then, he is a very modest gentleman," I said.

"Like master like man," was the ready Irish reply.

"You're a sad blarneyer," I laughed. "You will be letting me disarm you, next."

"No I won't, sir, voluntarily," he answered. "You are not the Lotzen sort."

"You have fenced with him?"

"Frequently."

"And disarmed him?"

I saw Bernheim smile.

"Yes, once—the first time we engaged. He has disliked me ever since."

"I am rather astonished at you," I said; "where was your finesse?"

"It was quite unintentional. He tried to work a *coup* that is very little known. Instead of the regular defence I used one I had myself developed—and which ends in a wrench. I gave it a bit too vigorously and the Duke dropped his foil.

Bernheim gave a gruff laugh. "Dropped it!" he exclaimed. "Aye, and so lightly it flew twenty feet and hit the wall near the roof."

"I think," said I, "I would like to know that *coup* and its defences."

"They are yours, sir," he said. "But I am at a loss where Lotzen got the attack. It isn't known to six persons in Europe—even among the *maîtres*."

"And your own defence?"

"Is, I am sure, known to me, alone. The man, with whom I worked it out, died a week after it was perfected."

"But, you have fenced with Lotzen frequently since then, you say?"

"Many times, sir."

"Hasn't he invariably used that particular attack?"

"And been met always by the regular defence. I took no chances on his discovering the secret. I am confident he thinks, now, I disarmed him by a mere accident."

"I suppose you let him score on you occasionally?" I said.

Moore shook his head. "Never, unless it were the very limit of his reach. I don't trust him—sometimes, buttons are lost from foils. I try to be very diplomatic by touching him very infrequently. Though I rather think it is pearls before swine; for he is too good a fencer not to see I am sparing him, and too jealously vindictive to appreciate my courtesy."

I picked up a foil and made it whistle through the air.

"Come, Colonel Bernheim," I said, "I am at your service. Shall we use the masks?"

"For Your Highness's sake, yes," he answered. "I'm apt to be a trifle wild at times."

There was nothing especially graceful about my senior Aide; and, besides being past the prime of life, he was of a rather bulky tallness, stolid and phlegmatic. I could readily imagine his style, and a very few passes confirmed it. He was of the ordinary type and I could have run him through without the least effort. As it was, I touched him, presently, once on each arm—then disengaged and saluted.

"I thank Your Highness," he said; "it could just as well have been my heart and throat a dozen times."

"I am younger and more active," I explained.

But he smiled it down. "I am not sensitive, sir. Besides, it gives me joy."

I supposed he was thinking of Lotzen.

After a short rest, Moore and I faced each other.

"Let us cut the parades," I said—and Bernheim gave the word to engage.

Without conceit I can say that I am more than moderately skillful with the sword. It is, possibly, the one hobby of my life. My father and grandfather before me were strong fencers, and one of my earliest recollections is being given a toy foil and put through the parades. There is a saying that "a swordsman is born not made," and it is a true one. But, unless there is hard study and training from childhood, the birth gift is wasted and there is only a made-fencer in the end. My good sire had appreciated this fact, and not only gave me the best instructors obtainable in America, but, in my second year's vacation from "The Point," he took me to Paris and kept me hard at work under the best French *maitres*. From that time, on I had practiced assiduously, and spending all my leaves in Europe and fencing in all the best schools of the Continent.

Our blades had little more than crossed when I knew that it would take all my skill to hold my own, even for a short time. Moore was, far and away, the best fencer I had ever encountered; and I thought I had faced about all the famous ones of first force. His agility was amazing; his wrist like steel; his anticipation masterly. For every time I touched him, he touched me twice; though none, on either side, would have been more than a scratch. Then, in the midst of a fierce rally, I forced a pretty opening and I

thrust. No guard seemed possible—it was a sure *cœur*. The next instant, there came a wrench, that almost tore off my fingers, and my foil flew across the room. Moore had led me into the final position of Lotzen's attack, and had disarmed me exactly as he had the Duke.

I held out my left hand to him—the right still tingled.

"Beautiful!" I said. "It's a marvellous defence and marvellously done."

Moore bowed very low over my hand. "It is a pleasure to serve under Your Highness," he said.

"Aye! that it is," said Bernheim.

He would be a very queer individual who would not be affected by such sincerity; and I told them so, and feelingly.

Then Moore showed me the attack and its two defences; and I practiced them with him until I had them perfectly at command.

"What would be my chances against Lotzen?" I asked.

"You could kill him easily," said Moore. "Only, be careful of his play in tierce; he is very strong in that."

"I don't know that I want to kill him," I said. "Yet, neither do I care for him to kill me."

Both looked at me in quick interrogation. I motioned for them to sit down.

"I've had a visit from the Duke, this afternoon," I said. And I told them the entire interview.

Bernheim smiled sourly, when I had ended.

"You may have good use, sir, for that trick of fence," he said. "Lotzen means mischief and that promptly."

"Evidently, his visit with His Majesty and the Princess was not to his satisfaction," Moore remarked; "and, if Your Highness can ascertain just what did occur there, I'll wager it will account for his conduct to-day."

"And it would be just as well for Your Highness to wear a steel vest," said Bernheim; "it's very handy to turn a knife or a revolver bullet."

I laughed. "Of course, steel vests are such ordinary articles of attire they can be purchased in any shop."

"I'll supply the vest," he answered, "if Your Highness will use it."

"It seems absurd," I declared.

"It's a wise precaution, sir," Moore urged.

"One might suppose we were back in the days of the Guises," I said. "However, bring your coat of mail around to-night and I'll look it over. But, I warn you, it will have to be a very snug fit."

"I will answer for that, also," said Bernheim.

Later in the afternoon, I rode over to the Field of Mars—a huge piece of ground on the Lake front—for the evening parade of the Cuirassiers of the Guard. This was their one hundred and fiftieth anniversary, and on every one of them it had been the unbroken custom for the then Governor of

Dornlitz to be present and pass the Regiment in Review—saving, of course, in war-time, when it chanced to be in active service in the field.

The crowd of spectators was enormous. The Valerians seem to have a genuine love for their Army—largely, I fancy, because the Army is not permitted to tyrannize over the citizen. Because a man wore the King's uniform gave him no privilege to insult or to maltreat those who did not; and conferred no immunity from proper and adequate punishment if he did. The Dalberg principle is similar to the American; that the Army is the guardian of the civilian, not his oppressor; and that its business is to protect not to browbeat. For generations, it has been instilled into the Valerian soldier that his uniform could be smirched only by himself—and stern, indeed, was the judgment of him who ventured to think and do otherwise. For an officer to strike a civilian without just cause meant to be cashiered; and to kill one, save as justified by the civil law, meant to be hung as a common felon. I had seen enough of the other Continental Armies to be very proud of the Army of Valeria.

It was a pretty sight—the long line of white uniformed Cuirassiers in burnished corselets and black-plumed helmets; with the Lake for a background, and rank on rank of spectators on either side. In front, were the carriages of the Aristocracy of the Capital; and, as I galloped down to take post

after the review, I could not but wonder how many of all that crowd regarded me with a friendly eye. Behind me clattered a brilliant Staff, and in my hand was the Baton of a Marshal, yet, never in my life, had I felt so utterly alone as at that moment. And Lotzen's recent sneer, that I could hope to hold the Crown only if the Princess Dehra were my Queen, struck me in all its truth. Surely, it was the climax of absurdity for me to aspire to rule this people, to whom I was a stranger and in whose eyes I would be, in effect, a pure usurper.

Then the great band of the Regiment blared out, and I settled myself for the march-by.

When it was over, and the last troop had broken into column and had trotted away, I dismissed my Staff, except Moore, and rode across to where I had noticed Lady Helen Radnor.

"If you were not a Prince I would not speak to you," she said, as I dismounted.

"Then," said I, as I bowed over her hand, "there is some compensation in being a Prince."

"I have not seen you for ages," she complained.

"I've been very busy."

"That is no excuse among friends, sir; besides, the Princess has been away for weeks."

"I did not imagine you would miss me," I said—and glanced at her left hand.

She laughed, and held it up. "The finger is quite bare, she said; "but, I'll take off the glove, if you wish."

"I'm sorry," I said. "He is such a good chap."

She raised her eyebrows.

I leaned a bit closer. "You won't refuse him when he does offer?" I asked.

"I suppose an Archduke cannot be impertinent," she said.

"Not when he does't mean to be," said I.

"Do you know," said she slowly, and looking at me hard, the while, "I was foolish enough to think, very long ago, that you rather liked me, yourself."

"And it's just because I do—that I hoped the finger wasn't bare," I answered.

"How deliciously unselfish!" she exclaimed. "You will next be resigning the Princess to His Grace of Lotzen."

"Quite between ourselves, I'll be doing nothing of the sort," I said, with mock confidentialness.

"Nevertheless, I think I'll tell the Duke he has only to wait," said she.

"And I'll confide to Courtney he has only to ask to be taken," I returned.

She laughed. "You might do it right now—here he is."

I turned just as Courtney dismounted.

"May I intrude, Your Royal Highness?" he asked.

"Come along," said I; "Lady Helen wants to hear some gossip and I don't know any."

A bit of a smile came into his eyes. "And that, though you are, yourself, the most gossiped about individual in Dornlitz," he answered.

"Another penalty of my new estate," said I; "the butt of all and the confidant of none."

Courtney tapped my Baton. "Have you noticed, Lady Helen, what a steady run of hard luck our friend, here, has had ever since he came to Valeria?" he asked.

"Indeed I have," said she; "and I've been so sorry for him."

Then she nodded most pleasantly to someone, and Courtney and I turned and bowed. It was the Marquise de Vierle, wife of the French Ambassador.

"How about her Masque to-night?" I asked; "will it be worth while?"

"It's very evident you are new to Dornlitz," Courtney observed—and Lady Helen laughed.

"The Vierle Balls outrival even the Court functions," she explained.

"Are you going?" I asked her.

"I am, indeed."

"And you, Courtney?"

"I shall look in late."

I motioned to Moore. "Who is on duty to-night?" I asked.

"I am, sir."

"Could you manage two costumes for the Vierle Masque?"

"Quite readily, sir."

"Very good," I said. "And let them be as near alike as possible," I added.

By this time the Field was almost deserted, and,

at Lady Helen's suggestion, Courtney and I turned our horses over to my orderly and drove back with her.

"I suppose," said I, "that fancy dress is required to-night."

"It is absolutely *de rigueur*," said Courtney; "and there is no unmasking."

"Really!" said I. "It promises very well."

"And it realizes all it promises—maybe, a bit more," Lady Helen laughed.

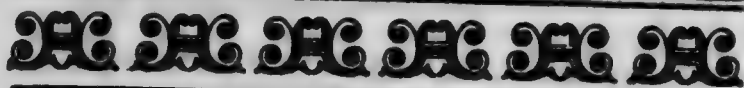
"How shall I recognize you?" I asked.

She considered a moment. "I am to stay the night with the Marquise, and we shall both wear white silk court gowns of the period of Henry of Navarre. I'll also put a red rose in my hair."

"And I," said Courtney, "will be caparisoned in a plum velvet court suit, à la Louis Quinze. You will know me easily by the awkward way I handle the high red heels."

"As I don't know what Moore will provide for me," said I, "I will adopt Lady Helen's rose; and, as I can't fasten it in my hair, I'll carry it in my mouth."

"A good idea," said Courtney; "and I'll put one in my button hole."



XXI

THE BAL MASQUE

WHEN Moore and I entered the French Embassy, that night, my own valet could not have distinguished which was the Aide and which the Archduke. By some means, which I did not bother to inquire, Moore had secured two suits of black velvet, of the time of the Thirteenth Louis, which were marvels in fit and style. We were of one height and very similar in frame—there being but a few pounds difference in our weights—and, with the long curls under the big hats with their flowing plumes, and the black silk masks, we were as alike as twins. Even our swords were similar—long, leather-sheathed rapiers with dead gold hilts.

Under my doublet I laced the steel vest Bernheim brought me. It and one other were made by a famous Milan armorer three hundred years ago, Bernheim said; and the two had been in his family ever since. And, so far as he knew, there were no others like them in all Europe; not even in the Museums. It was a wonderful piece of work, truly. The links were small and yielding and so cunningly joined that it was as pliable as knitted

wool, and much less bulky. Indeed, when rolled into a ball, it was no bigger than a man's fist. It looked quite too flimsy to afford any protection; yet, when I saw it proof against a bullet fired from a revolver and also turn repeated sword thrusts, I was, perforce, convinced. And I was completely won when I donned it; it was like a vest of silk. And I was well pleased it was so; for I was wearing it simply to oblige good old Bernheim, who seemed so earnest about it. I had no notion it would be of any service to me that night.

As everyone came masked, admission was, of course, only by card, after which all were conducted singly to a small room where the mask was removed and identification satisfactorily established by the Ambassador's Secretary.

It chanced, when my turn came, that the Marquis de Vierle, himself, was in the room; and, when he saw my face, his welcome was intensely ardent. He apologized effusively that I had been received at the regular entrance and, so, had been compelled to wait my turn for identification—but, surely, my regrets had been noted.

I told him he was quite right—that I had regretted, and that the apology was, really, due from me for coming, and that I had enjoyed being pushed and jostled, once again, like an ordinary mortal. He wanted to treat me with all the deference due me and I very firmly declined. I told him, frankly, I was there to see and enjoy and not to be seen nor to re-

ceive special attentions. I asked him, as a particular favor, to tell no one of my presence and to permit me to remain absolutely incog.; that, for this night, I was plain Armand Dalberg and not a Royal Highness nor an Archduke.

The house was one of the largest in the Capital, standing in a park of its own, on the edge of the inner town, and had been the residence of the French Legation for a century. It had been improved and added to, at various periods, until it had taken on about every known style of architecture. And, as a result, there were queer passages and many unexpected recesses. The furniture was as varied as the building; and the tapestries and pictures and frescoes were rather famous. The grounds, however, were the main attraction; they covered twenty acres and were maintained exactly as originally laid out by a famous Italian landscape artist—with immense trees and huge hedges and narrow walks and wonderful vistas.

The Marquise de Vierle welcomed her guests alone in one of the small reception rooms; everyone entering singly and unmasking—she, herself, being, as yet, in ordinary evening dress. She was a very handsome woman, much younger than the Marquis, and of the very oldest French Aristocracy—a *grande dame* in bearing as well as in birth.

"Your Royal Highness does us great honor," she said, as I bowed over her hand.

I answered her in suit, and we tossed the usual number of compliments back and forth.

"Whom shall we bid join you at supper?" she asked.

"My dear Marquise," I protested, "you have your personal party selected—doubtless invited; and my unexpected coming must not break your arrangements. Let me wander about, and pay no more regard to me than to your most ordinary guest."

But she declined to excuse me; insisting that she had made no choice, except Lady Helen Radnor, who happened to be staying the night with her. So, without being churlish, I could decline no longer.

"If your Ladyship will make the list very small, and, then, engage to give me all your smiles I shall accept with pleasure," I said.

"I will promise both," she said. "Who attends you to-night?"

"My Aide, Colonel Moore."

"Suppose, then, we make it a party of eight and ask Lady Helen, the Countess de Relde, Mademoiselle d'Essoldé and the American Ambassador."

"Charming!" I exclaimed; "charming!"

"And what hour will Your Highness be served?" she asked.

"At whatever hour Madame la Marquise fixes."

"Say, one o'clock, then—in the blue breakfast room; it is quiet and retired."

I bowed again over her hand and was withdrawing, when the Marquise stopped me.

"Would not Your Highness like to know some of the Masques?" she asked.

"Very much, indeed," said I.

"Then you will find a chair in the recess behind the curtains, yonder—and, when you are tired, there is a door, which slides without noise, opening into a private corridor leading to the Garden. *Comprenez vous, Monsieur le Prince?*"

I laughed. "Perfectly," said I. "And I may have Colonel Moore with me? There will be many faces I shall not know."

"He is without?" she asked.

"Yes—and costumed somewhat like myself."

She touched a bell; I held up my mask.

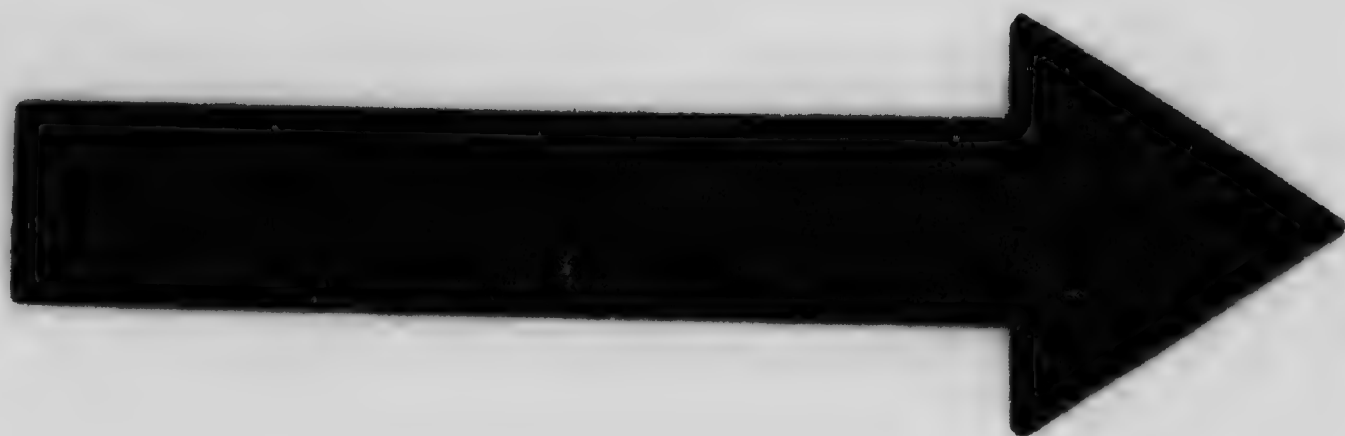
"Admit the gentleman in black velvet, like Monsieur," she ordered.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed, when Moore entered.

"Puzzle," said I. "Pick the Archduke."

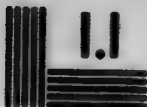
"Impossible—and, if you two go around together, some of my guests will think they are getting double vision very early in the evening."

From the recess, we could see all that entered and hear every word said. And it struck me how very eloquent it was of the character of the Marquise de Vierle that she should, deliberately, provide a concealed audience while she greeted—alone—every man and woman of Dornlitz Society. I must admit I rather enjoyed the experience—though I very rarely guessed the face behind the mask. It is



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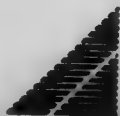
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astonishing how effectively an unusual costume disguises even those we know well.

Suddenly, the Marquis entered hurriedly.

"Do you know, Claire," he said, "that the American Archduke is here to-night?"

Instantly I laid my hand on the sliding door. It was time for us to be going. And the door refused to move. I looked at Moore, who shrugged his shoulders. I could imagine the smile his mask concealed. But the Marquise met the situation with a laugh.

"I do indeed—and I rather fancy you will find His Highness in yonder recess," she said.

I parted the curtains and stepped out—and Colonel Moore beside me.

"Madame la Marquise has taken pity on the stranger," I said; "and has given him an opportunity to recognize his friends."

If the diplomat were surprised, no one would have guessed it—except that his bow was more than usually low.

"It is a great privilege, my dear Prince, if we can be of any use to you," he said.

I took a sudden resolve. "I very much fear my unexpected presence to-night is a source of concern and inconvenience to Your Excellency," I said. "With your permission I will take my leave," and I made to go.

Vierle came quickly to me.

"It will make the Marquise and me most un-

happy, if you do," he said. "And I shall tell you frankly what brought me here. The lady who styles herself your wife is among the guests—she is in the next room, now, waiting to be admitted. My purpose was to have the Marquise request her to depart at once."

I laughed, and put my hand on his shoulder.

"So far as I am concerned," I said, "I pray you do nothing of the sort. The lady does not bother me in the slightest. Besides, she will not know I'm here—and I shall not present myself to her, you may be sure."

"Yet, we owe Your Highness an explanation of her presence," the Marquise exclaimed.

"My dear Madame de Vierle, you owe me nothing of the sort," I said. "I am still enough of an American to think that a hostess is never called upon to explain a guest. And, what is more, the whole difficulty is of my own making, in coming after I had declined."

"Surely, Your Highness is very gracious; yet, I would very much prefer to explain," she said. "It was this way: Madeline Stafford and I were friends and schoolmates in Paris. We both married about the same time and, then, lost touch with each other. I had neither seen nor heard from her until I received a note some weeks ago. After Your Highness regretted for to-night, I sent her a card. I mentioned the matter to the Duke of Lotzen and he said that, under the circumstances, and as everyone would be

masked, it would be entirely proper. That is my explanation."

"And one amply sufficient; even if any were required," I said.

I thought I saw my dear cousin's game.

"And you are quite sure you do not object to her remaining?"

"Quite sure," said I; "and I even hope she will enjoy herself. I shall, I know. And, at supper, I'll confide my adventures to your Ladyship." Then I took a shot in the dark. "And I know His Highness of Lotzen will be forever sorry he could not be here to-night," I added.

"He was good enough to call and tell me so," was the answer.

I was sure, now, I saw my dear cousin's game.

Then I bowed over the Marquise's hand and Moore and I went out through the sliding door—which, when the Marquis rolled it back for us, I saw was not locked. In my haste I had not seen the small brass button which released the latch.

"It's a pity Vierle didn't tell us what costume Mrs. Spencer is wearing," Moore remarked, as we reached the Garden.

I stopped short. "What a blunderer I am. It would be better if you did the thinking for me."

"Shall I go back and ask him?"

"It will keep until supper," said I. "In the meantime, let us hunt up Courtney and Lady Helen." I explained to him how to distinguish them; then,

taking from my doublet a small package wrapped in foil, I selected a red rose and put it in my mouth.

"Now," said I, "let us have a look around."

For a time I was more occupied with the beauty of the Garden than with my fellow-masques, and I left it to Moore to keep a careful eye for the other two red roses. I could not but notice, however, that we were attracting much attention; by reason, I assumed, of our striking similarity; and a number of times Moore replied wittily to some pleasant banter flung at us. I should say, perhaps, that the grounds were so thoroughly lighted with electricity that they were as bright as day; the lamps being so carefully distributed that there were, practically, no shadows.

Presently, on the bank of a miniature lake near the farthest wall, we came upon three women and a man.

"The Dromios," said one of the women.

"Satan's Twins," laughed another.

"A pair of black Knaves," echoed the third.

The man laughed, but said nothing.

I put my hand through Moore's arm and swung him around.

"Why not add us to your own Knave and then give us a Queen apiece?" I asked.

She, who had spoken last, clapped her hands.

"Delicious!" she exclaimed. "Will monsieur be my Knave?"

The voice was very soft and musical, and I saw Moore glance quickly at her.

"That will I, my lady," said I; and stepped

forward and kissed her hand; then drew it through my arm.

"Who chooses the other black Knave?" asked Moore, sweeping off his hat, and bowing with it held across his heart. I noted he had changed his voice.

"I do," said she who had styled us "Satan's Twins;" and she gave him her hand.

He, who had been with them, shrugged his shoulders and turned to her who had spoken first.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "I am waiting to be chosen."

She laughed. "Mademoiselle will be deeply honored," she said, "if monsieur will deign to accept the only Queen that is left."

It chanced that none of these four Masques had gone through the reception room while we were behind the curtains, so, of course, I had not the slightest notion of their identity. It was quite possible Moore would be able to make a good guess; and, I fancied, he had already placed my Queen—she of the musical laugh. However, so long as they did not discover me, it mattered not at all who they were. I could trust Moore to get me away from them if he found it wise. So I devoted myself to my companion.

She was of good height and rather slender, and wore a blue gown, with powdered hair. Her face and ears were completely hidden by her mask, but, judging from the bit of neck that was visible, and other indications, she was not over twenty-five. I let

her pick the way, and we led the others slowly around through the part of the Garden most removed from the house and where the Masques were fewest. I took it, that she had no desire to be prominent, and I was very well content.

She was a rare flirt, though—that, I knew, before we had gone a hundred yards; and it kept my wits very busy to hold my own even moderately well, and to keep from giving her any clue to my identity.

“Do you know, monsieur,” she said, presently, “you and your friend are not the only two men here, to-night, who are dressed alike?”

“Are they black knaves, too?” I asked.

She tapped me on the arm with her fan.

“Don’t be sarcastic, my dear,” she said; “though, I admit, we were very forward.”

“Nonsense!” I replied. “This is a Masque. Only, are you quite sure we were the first men you bantered?”

“You forget, sir; Folly has no past,” she said.

“A true word, mademoiselle,” I agreed. “Shall it be so with us when we part?”

She looked up at me a moment.

“Monsieur must be married,” she laughed.

“Every man is married—or hopes to be,” said I.

She tapped me again with her fan.

“You forget, again,” she said. “Folly never—moralizes.”

“True,” said I, “she hasn’t any morals.”

"Why make Folly feminine?" she asked. "Methinks, there is usually a Knave for every Queen."

"Methinks, I know one Queen who could have Knaves as many as she listed," I answered, bending down and trying to see her eyes.

But she quickly interposed her fan.

"I am masked, monsieur," she said.

I ignored the reproof. "That," said I, "is my supreme regret."

"*Merci, mon ami,*" she said. "You may kiss my hand when you leave me."

"Only your hand?" I asked.

"Not even that, now," she retorted—then turned and leaned against the hedge.

Two men were coming down the path toward us.

"Here are the other twin Knaves," she said.

And it was true enough—they were as alike as Moore and myself; only, they wore white satin small clothes and powdered perukes. They were in earnest conversation, but broke off as they neared us.

"*Parbleu!*" exclaimed the man with us. "There seems to be a plague of twins to-night."

One of the White Masques made as though to halt, but the other whispered something and tried to draw him on.

Our fellow laughed irritatingly, and waved his hand toward Moore and me.

"We've got a pair of Knaves here, also," he bantered; "perchance, the four of you are from the same pack."

The White Masque turned quickly. "Then it would be a pack, monsieur, in which you would be about equal to the deuce," he said.

"Or the joker," said the other, as they moved away, "which, in a gentleman's game, has no place."

Our man made a quick step toward them; but Moore caught him sharply by the shoulder.

"Let them go," he said curtly.

The other hesitated—then shrugged his shoulders. "For the present be it, then," he said.

"And, look you, sir," Moore went on; "I do not know you, but, if you will take my poor advice, you will let it be for the future, too." He offered his arm to his companion. "Mademoiselle, shall we continue the stroll?"

"What a queer speech," said my Masque, "one might almost fancy they were of royal rank."

"The King, possibly," I suggested.

"Nonsense, monsieur; you know perfectly well Majesty is not in Dornlitz."

The Duke of Lotzen and the American Archduke, then."

She laughed. "Very likely; very likely, indeed!"

"Mademoiselle is pleased to ridicule."

"And monsieur is pleased to affect ignorance."

"Of what?" I asked.

"When did your Knaveship come to Dornlitz?"

"Very recently."

"You must be a very stupid—diplomat."

"I am," I agreed.

"Do you know the 'American Archduke,' as you call him?"

"Very slightly," said I.

"Doubtless you would rather know his wife," she said naively.

"Then you think he is married?" I asked.

"Of course, monsieur—so does everyone—don't you?"

"No," said I. "I don't."

She laughed. "You mean you don't want to t'ink so,—madame is very beautiful—*n'est ce pas?*"

"Do you know her?" I asked evasively.

"No, monsieur; do you?"

"I have met her."

"Oh! Oh!" she exclaimed. Then she looked at me quickly. "I thought she received no visitors."

I shrugged my shoulders. "The lady does not interest me," I said; "let us talk of som 'hing else."

"Of the American Archduke, then," she suggested.

"Why not of yourself?" I urged.

"I am only a Masque—the American may be a King."

"Not likely," I scoffed.

"Are you for Lotzen?" she demanded.

"Diplomats are neutral," said I; "but, *entre nous*, I have become rather interested in the American."

"So have I," said she. "He is very handsome."

"Thank you," I said, involuntarily.

She stopped and looked at me. I was glad, indeed, for the mask.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Would you mind repeating that last remark?" she said.

I pretended surprise.

"You said the American was very handsome and I said 'thank you.' I mean I don't agree with you."

"Oh!" she answered.

But I would have been better satisfied if I could have seen her face.

"I wouldn't let the Valerians know it," she went on. "He is the perfect double of the great national Hero."

"So I've heard."

"And it's no small item in his popularity."

"I didn't know he was popular," I said.—This was getting interesting.

"Ally, monsieur, your ignorance of the very matters, which you should know, would suggest you are an American diplomat."

"Your Ladyship is severe," I said.

"I meant to be—though there are exceptions; the present Ambassador is one. He ranks with the best of his fellows."

"Now, that," said I, "I have heard."

She laughed. "Come, monsieur, lay aside this affected ignorance and gossip a bit. Is the American to marry the Princess Royal?"

"I thought you were insisting, a moment since, that he had a wife," I observed.

"Oh, that's of no consequence. It will be very easy to divorce her."

Here, doubtless, was the popular view of this matter; and it gave me the shudders.

Then the swing of a waltz came from the house.

"Shall we dance?" I said.

She smiled. "Monsieur is bored—let us wait for my friends."

I protested; but she was firm. And, so, when the others came up, Moore and I made our adieux.

When we were out of hearing, Moore handed me a bit of paper.

"This just reached me," he said.

It was from the Secret Police and read:

"S. is at Vierle Masque. She wears a gypsy dress of black and red. L. is also at Masque—he and Count Bigler are dressed alike in white satin. L. came last and his presence is unknown to the Vierles for he avoided unmasking by personating Bigler."

"So, they were the White Twins," I remarked.
"You knew them?"

"I knew only Lotzen."

"Here: your advice to our quick-tempered companion—who was he?"

"I couldn't make him out," said Moore; "but he knew the women and was their escort from the house."

"He seemed to be a bit sour about something."

"My companion said it was because the Blue Masque chose you."

"She was very charming," said I. "Who was she?"

"I knew neither his nor mine," said he evasively.

"But mine?" I insisted. "She of the sweet voice—which, Colonel, I observed, you noted."

He hesitated an instant; then answered:

"Mademoiselle d'Essoldé."

"Indeed!" I exclaimed. If rumor spoke truly, Mademoiselle d'Essoldé carried Moore's heart in her keeping. Then I laughed. "Never mind, Colonel, we shall see her at supper, presently—she will be beside you, I think."

"Your Highness is very thoughtful," he said.

"Don't give me the credit—it was Lady Vicerie's idea," I answered—and changed the subject.

"What is Lotzen up to now," I asked.

"Some deviltry—either women or you."

"I think it's both," said I. "The Marquise consulted him as to sending Mrs. Spencer an invitation, and you remember how careful he was to call in person to regret he could not come to-night. He saw, at once, his opportunity for a talk with Mrs. Spencer. Depend on it, that is the explanation of the White Twins, and of Lotzen's evading identification. I dare say he already has an alibi perfected."

"He has had no chance to see her, yet" said Moore. "I'll have her ordered to her hotel."

"No, she must remain," said I; "I'm committed

to the Marquise. Besides, I'm minded to play their own game for them, a bit. Do you think Lotzen knows I'm at the Masque?"

Moore thought a moment. "Lady Vierle told him you were not coming, when she asked as to Mrs. Spencer," he said. "And he may have let it go at that; but it wouldn't be his usual method. My last order, before we left the Epsau, was that you were indisposed and had retired and, on no account, were you to be disturbed without Bernheim's express permission. But, servants are purchasable and spies are plenty, and Lotzen knows how to reach the first and use the second. On the whole, it is likely he has been advised that you are here, though he may not know your costume. The long military cloaks completely hid our dress; and you will recall that, at my suggestion, we concealed our hats under them until we were in the carriage."

"I can't get used to this espionage," I said. "Suppose we take a look around for the Gypsy Lady; doubtless, we shall find her with a White Masque."

We were on a walk bordered by a hedge of box-wood, shoulder high. On the other side, was another path with several Masques on it. Suddenly, one of them, as he passed, reached over the hedge and struck me in the back with a dagger.

The blow sent me plunging forward, but did me no hurt. I owed my life to Bernheim. His steel vest

had stayed the blade that, otherwise, would have found my heart.

With a cry, Moore sprang to me and caught me in his arms.

"I'm not hurt," I said, recovering my balance.

"Thank God!" he ejaculated—then took the hedge at a vault.

I caught him by the arm as he landed on the other side.

"Stay," I commanded. "Let the fellow go."

Moore looked at me a moment. "Let him go?" he exclaimed incredulously.

I nodded. "And come along—let us get away from here."

Without a word, he vaulted back and we moved off.

The whole thing had occurred so unexpectedly and so swiftly that the few Masques, who had been in the vicinity, evidently had not noticed the murderous nature of the assault; and the peculiar arrangement of the hedges and trees had enabled my assailant to disappear almost instantly. Indeed, but for Moore's vaulting the boxwood after him, it is likely no one would have suspected anything unusual.

Several men came up and inquired if they could be of any assistance, but I assured them it was a matter of no consequence—that I had, evidently, been mistaken for another—or it was only a bit of pleasantry from some friend who had recognized me.

"But that you are uninjured," remarked one, "I

should almost say it was a case of attempted assassination."

I laughed. "An assassination would fit in well with the costumes and the garden—everything is mediæval to-night."

"Except the electric lights," Moore threw in, dryly; and we bowed ourselves away.

"I suppose we may now assume that somebody knows my disguise," I observed. "Did you see my friend with the dagger?"

"Yes—as much of him as there was to see—he wore a long black cloak and was rather above medium size. If Your Highness had not stopped me I might have caught him."

"That's just why I stopped you," said I. "I didn't want to embarrass the De Vierles. Think what it would mean to them to have it known that one of their guests had attempted to stab to death an Archduke."

"Hum—I don't see why that is more important than protecting your life."

"My dear Colonel," said I, "if it were a question between my life and Lady Vierle's temporary embarrassment, I would look after my life. But my life is still safe, and in no more danger with that rogue at large than with him caught."

"It would be one less scoundrel for Lotzen to work with," Moore objected.

"I fancy he has got so many scoundrels on his pay roll that one, more or less, won't matter," I

answered. "But, I've no objection to a quiet inquiry as to this assault—it may come very handy, some time—so, do you look up the Secret Service Officer, in charge here to-night, and give him such facts as you deem proper, and let a report be made to me in the morning."

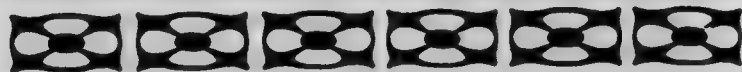
"First, let me escort you to the house," he insisted.

I put my hand on his arm. "Lotzen may have his hired braves," I said, "but I'm blessed with two good friends in you and Bernheim."

The warm-hearted Irishman took my hand and pressed it.

"We both are Your Highness's servants until death," he said.

"I'm in no further danger to-night, I fancy," said I. "And here come Lady Helen and the American Ambassador. I'll remain with them. When you have done your errand rejoin me."



XXII

BLACK KNAVE AND WHITE

THERE were three women and a man in the approaching party, and it chanced I knew them all. Courtney had a red rose fastened conspicuously on his breast, and Lady Helen wore a great bunch of them in her hair—another was gowned like her and, so, must be the Marquise de Vierle herself—the fourth was Mademoiselle d'Essoldé.

"If you wish," said I, barring the path and sweeping the ground with my feather. "I'll hunt another rose. I've been searching for you so long that the one I began with has gone to pieces."

"Of course, Your Highness would never think of looking in the Bail Room," said Lady Helen.

Mademoiselle d'Essoldé started and, then, drew a bit back.

"Never, indeed, until I had searched the Garden," I retorted. Then I bowed to Mademoiselle d'Essoldé as the Marquise presented her. I could see she was very much embarrassed, so I tried to reassure her by being extremely cordial.

The Marquise wanted to show Courtney the bridge and the lake; and, when we passed the place

where Moore and I had met the Queens—as I had styled them—Mademoiselle d'Essoldé found her opportunity and whispered:

"Will Your Royal Highness ever forgive me?"

"On one condition," I said.

"It's granted—name it."

"That you be nice to him who sits beside you at supper, to-night."

She looked at me a moment—masks are very annoying when one wants to see the face.

"That will be an easy penance," she said—and I understood she had been told who that man was to be.

I bent toward her. "Let him know it, then," I said earnestly.

"Your Highness likes him?" she asked.

"I do more than like him," I said.

She threw a quick glance up at me.

"Maybe I do, too," she laughed.

"Good," said I; then began to speak of something else. There is just as proper a point to quit a subject as to start it.

The grass on the bank of the lake was quite dry and Lady Helen suggested that we sit down.

"This reminds me of a garden in Florence," she said. "Someone might tell us a story from Poccaccio."

The Marquise held up her hands in affected horror.

"Helen! Helen! You're positively shocking," she said.

"Lady Helen evidently believes in living up to our costumes," I ventured.

"Why not?" she laughed, "since the masks hide our faces?"

"Very good, my dear," said Lady Vierle, "you tell the first story; we will take our cue from you."

Lady Helen removed her mask. "Then, that is your first cue," she said.

"I breathe easier," Mademoiselle d'Essoldé remarked.

"We all do," said I—then, suddenly, replaced mine and arose.

"Indulge me for a moment," I said, and sauntered over to the path a little distance away; nor answered the chaffing that was flung after me. I had seen a woman in gypsy dress and a cavalier in white coming slowly down the walk. I did not doubt it was Mrs. Spencer and Lotzen, and I intended to let them know they were recognized.

As we neared each other, I halted and stared at them with the most obvious deliberation. The gypsy made some remark to her companion, to which he nodded. I had little notion they would address me; and, certainly, none that they would stop. But, there (though whether it was pure bravado or because my attitude was particularly irritating, I know not), Lotzen gave me another surprise.

He paused in front of me and looked me over from head to foot.

"Monsieur seems interested," he said, making no effort to disguise his tones.

I made no answer.

"And I hope monsieur will pardon me if I tell him his manners are atrocious," he went on.

Again, no answer.

"Though, of course, no one could ever expect monsieur to understand why," he continued.

Of a sudden, it dawned on my slow brain that Lotzen did not know whether it was Moore or I that confronted him, and he wanted to hear my voice. I saw no utility in obliging him; so, I stood impassive, staring calmly at them.

Lotzen turned to his companion.

"Speak to him, mademoiselle," he said; "perchance the dulcet tones of Beauty may move the Beast to speech."

I smiled at him addressing her as "mademoiselle."

She shook her head. "Methinks it's Balaam not Beauty you need."

He laughed. "Even that does not stir him—the fellow must be deaf."

"Try signs on him," she suggested.

"Good! I'll sign to him we want to see his face."

"How, pray?"

"By pulling off his mask," he answered—and put out his hand, as though to do it. With his fingers almost on it, he paused.

I stood quite still. I felt perfectly sure he would

not touch me; but, if he did, I intended to knock him down. And I was not mistaken. After a moment, he dropped his arm.

The woman laughed. "Your nerve failed—his didn't," she said dryly.

"Not at all, mademoiselle. I thought of a better way.—Observe."

He slowly drew the long narrow-bladed sword, that went with his costume, and, taking the point in his left hand, bowed over it in mock courtesy.

"Will monsieur have the extreme kindness to remove his mask," he said.

I admit I was a bit astonished. Surely, this was rushing things with a vengeance—to deliberately raise a situation that meant either a fight or a complete back-down by one of us. And, as he would scarcely imagine I would do the latter, he must have intended to force a duel.

There might have been another reason, assuming that he was interested only in my identity:—this procedure would have told him; for Moore would not have dared draw sword on the Heir Presumptive. But I have never thought such was his idea; for he must have been very well satisfied, by this time, that none but an equal in rank would have acted so toward him.

And, being convinced that it was I that fronted him, he had suddenly seen an opportunity to accomplish in open fight what his hired assassin had bungled. It is notorious that American officers know practically

nothing of the art of fence; what easier than to drive me into drawing on him and, then, after a bit of play, to run me neatly through the heart. What mattered it if he were the aggressor? It would be easy to aver he had not known me—that I had chosen to insult him, and, having refused to unmask and apologize, had suffered the consequences of my own rashness and bad manners.

And, even suppose no one believed his story that he did not know me. What mattered it? One does not execute the Heir Presumptive of Valeria for murder. True, the King might rage—and a term of banishment to his mountain estates might follow; yet, what trifling penalties for the end attained. They would be only for the moment, as it were. But the American would be dead—the Crown sure—the Princess still unmarried.

Truly, it was a chance which would never come again; and not to seize it was to mock Fortune to her very face.

It takes far longer to write this than to think it. It all went through my mind in the brief space Lotzen gave me for reply.

"I am waiting, monsieur," he said.

The Gypsy laughed softly.

"You tell him so much he already knows," said she.

Lotzen looked at her—in surprise, I doubt not.

"Mademoiselle is impatient," he remarked.

She shrugged her pretty shoulders.

Then he bowed again to me.

"You see, monsieur," he said, "you tire the Lady; I must ask you to make haste."

If anyone think it easy to stand, stolidly, in one position for a considerable period, and have impertinent things said to him the while, let him try it. He will be very apt to change his notion. But, I stuck to it; and my soldier training helped me—and the mask relieved my face.

"You are stubborn, monsieur, as well as bad mannered. I shall have to spur you, I see," he went on. "I ask you, once again, monsieur, to remove your mask. If you do not, I shall give you a bit of steel in the left leg."

"And, if that be ineffective?" the lady asked.

"Then, I shall touch him in the other leg—and, if he still refuses, then, in the right arm—and, then, if necessary, in the left arm; each time a trifle deeper."

"And, then——?" she inflected, very sweetly.

"Then?" he repeated. "I think there will be no need for a 'then,' mademoiselle," he laughed sneeringly.

She nodded toward me.

"Isn't it about time to begin?" she asked.

"Your wish, my dear, is my law," he said. "You hear, monsieur; your time is up—prepare."

He stepped forward and thrust, very slowly, at my thigh. Even then, I could not think that he would

actually dare to touch me with his sword; and I made no motion. I proposed to call his bluff—if it were one.

Closer and closer, inch by inch, drew the point. It reached the velvet—hesitated—passed through—and just pierced my flesh—then, was withdrawn.

And, with that cut, came the blood-lust, like unto the rage of the berserker of old. Yet, somehow, I had the sense to stand quiet and let the red passion burn itself out. I would need all my coolness to meet Lotzen's skill.

"Now, will monsieur remove his mask?" he asked.

"You scarcely touched him," scoffed the Gypsy. Lotzen held up the sword.

"See the red upon the point?" he asked.

"Blood! You actually cut him!" she exclaimed—then pointed her finger at me, derisively. "And you wear a sword!" she sneered.

It was pretty hard to take. But I had a notion, foolish, possibly, to play the game a little longer.

"Come along, my friend," she went on. "This is poor sport. I hate a coward."

For an instant, I feared he would heed her and go—and that would have obliged me to become the aggressor; which I much preferred not to be.

"A coward!" he laughed—and looked at me. "You hear that, monsieur: a coward." Then he put his hand on her arm. "You are quite right, my dear, it is poor sport," he said. "Yet, stay a moment

longer. I shall forego the other cuts and tear off his mask, instead."

"And permit him to wear a sword?" she mocked. "Surely, not! Why don't you break it?"

"A charming suggestion—thank you.—You hear my Lady's wish, Monsieur le Coquin," he said to me, and presenting his blade at my breast. "Will you yield your sword or shall I be obliged to take it from you?"

At last, Lotzen had driven me to action, in pointing his sword at my breast. If he touched it my steel vest would be disclosed, at once; and that was not to my mind. It would explain the failure of his bravo's dagger. More than that I did not care for. Doubtless, he was wearing one himself at that very moment. One usually ascribes to his enemy methods similar to one's own—and, as Lotzen dealt in assassination, he would expect me to do the same.

I waited a moment. Then, stepping quickly out of reach, I drew my own sword.

"Here it is, my Lord," I said. "Which end will you take?"

"The only end that you can give me, monsieur—the hilt," was the answer.

"Come and get it, then," I drawled.

He turned to the Gypsy.

"Will mademoiselle pardon me," he said.

"Will you be long?" she asked.

"Only a moment. I'll make it very short."

"I'll wait," she said carelessly.

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OUR SWORDS FELL TO TALKING IN THE GARDEN OF THE MASKED BALL

He bowed to her—and then faced me.

"Has Monsieur le Coquin any particular spot in which he prefers to receive my point?" he asked.

"None, my Lord," I answered; "I shall leave that to your own good taste."

"*Merci, monsieur, merci!*" he said, and saluted.

"Yet, I may not be outdone in generosity. Therefore, in exchange for your hilt, monsieur, you shall have the whole length of my blade in your heart."

"That, my Lord, is on the Knees of the Gods," I said.

Then our swords fell to talking and our tongues were still.

The turf was free of brush or trees; and, as I have already said, the illumination was so arranged that, practically, there were no shadows. The Garden seemed almost as bright as day; indeed, save that the light was white, we might, just as well, have been duelling at noon-tide as at midnight.

It had not been hard to gather, from Lotzen's last remarks to his companion, what sort of a fight he proposed making; and, after the usual preliminary testing of strength, I contented myself with the simplest sort of defence and awaited the main attack.

It seems hardly possible that two men could engage in a combat with rapiers, at such an occasion, and not draw a crowd. There is something peculiarly penetrating about the ring of steel on steel at night. Yet, such was the extent of the grounds and, so retired was our locality, that no strangers were

attracted. Almost at the first stroke, however, I heard exclamations from the direction of my companions. In a moment, Courtney came running up, his drawn sword in hand—and the others after him.

I had plenty of use for my eyes with the immediate business in hand; but, as I chanced to be facing them, I had a vision of Courtney—his mask off—leaning forward intently watching the fight. Then, he calmly returned sword and drew back.

I heard the Marquise exclaim: "*Mon Dieu!* Someone is trying to kill His Highness—we must save him!"

But Courtney clapped his hand over her mouth and silenced her. Even in the press of the duel, I think, I smiled.

"Your pardon, my dear Marquise," he said, loudly—so I would hear it, I knew—"His Highness needs no saving."

Then I heard no more—for the Duke assumed the offensive fiercely and his sword began to move like lightning. And well, indeed, was it, for me, that I had learned something of this gentle game of fence, else had that night been my last on Earth.

Then, of a sudden, from out a sharp rally, came the first strokes of Moore's *coup*. I had been expecting it. I steadied myself to meet it, giving back just a trifle to lead Lotzen to think it was new to me. He pressed me hotly and, at length, the final position came—the way was open.

"Take it!" he said, savagely—and sent the thrust that should have made good his promise to bury the whole blade in my heart.

But his point never reached me—for, as his sword glided along mine, seemingly unopposed, I caught it exactly as Moore had shown me and wrenched with all the strength of my wrist and arm.

There was a sharp grinding of steel; and then, like a thing alive, the Duke's sword left his hand, sped through the air and settled, thirty feet away, point downward in the turf. where it stuck, quivering and swaying like a reed in the wind.

With a cry of sharp surprise, Lotzen sprang back and watched his sword as it circled and fell. I moved a step toward him. Then, he turned to me.

"It seems, Monsieur le Coquin," he said softly, "that I was in error; and that it is the point of your sword and not the hilt I am to take. So be it."

He draw himself up to attention, and raised his hand in salute.

"I am waiting," he said calmly.

Ferdinand of Lotzen was, doubtless, a bad lot. Once that night he had given me to assassination; and, just now, he himself had deliberately tried to kill me. He deserved no consideration; and, by every law of justification, could I, then and there, have driven my sword into his throat. Maybe I wanted to do it, too. We all are something of the savage at times. And I think he fully expected to die. He had told me frankly he purposed killing

me, and he would not look for mercy, himself. The dice had fallen against him. He had lost. And, like a true gambler, he was ready to pay stakes. To give the fellow his due, he was brave; with the sort of bravery that meets death—when it must—with a smiling face and a steady eye.

And, so, for a space, we stood. He, erect and ready. I, with hand on hip and point advanced.

I heard the gasps of women—a sob or two—and then, the rustle of skirts, followed instantly by Courtney's soft command.

"Stay, madame—the matter is for His Highness only to decide."

Lotzen laughed lightly.

"Strike, man," he said, "or the petticoats will steal me from you."

I stepped back and shot my sword into its sheath.

"Go," I ordered. "I do not want your life. Only, depart this house straightway, and take your bravoos with you. They will have no other opportunity to-night. And, mark you, sir, no further meeting with the Gypsy—now, nor hereafter."

He bowed low. "Monsieur is pleased to be generous," he sneered.

But I gave him my back and, removing my mask, went over to my friends.

The Marquise met me with a perfect gale of apologies. But I laughed them aside, telling her it was I who stood in need of pardon for becoming involved in such a breach of hospitality.

"Your Highness might have been killed," she insisted, woman-like.

"But I wasn't," said I, "so, pray, think no more about it."

Just then, Colonel Moore came up and, seeing us without our masks, he dropped his, also. I watched Mademoiselle d'Essoldé's greeting to him. It was all even he could have wished.

"I think it is about the supper hour," said Lady Vierle. "Let us go in."

I offered her my arm and, masking again, we led the way.

"Will Your Highness tell me something?" she asked immediately. "Did you know your antagonist?"

"I didn't see his face." I evaded.

She looked at me quickly. "Would it be better for me not to know?"

"Yes," said I, "I think it would."

There was, really, no reason why I should shield Lotzen; yet, neither was there any reason to rattle a family skeleton in public, and so a scandal, which would run the Kingdom over and be the gossip of every Court in Europe.

Then I lifted my mask so she could see my face.

"And, my dear Lady Vierle," I said earnestly, "if you would do me a great favor, you will promise to forget all about this unfortunate incident."

She, too, raised her mask and looked me frankly in the eyes.

"I promise," she said.

And I am sure she will keep her word.

I knew I could leave it to Courtney and Moore to insure the silence of Lady Helen and Mademoiselle d'Essoldé.

We lingered at the table until far into the morning. And, if Moore had any fault to find with his neighbor in blue, he was, indeed, a graceless grumbler.

Lady Helen was on one side of me, and we recalled the ride we had together the morning shortly after the Birthday Ball, when we met the Princess at the Old Forge.

"We never took that other ride we planned," I said—"the one to the Inn of the Twisted Pines."

"You have never asked me," she said dryly.

"Suppose we make it to-morrow at three," I suggested.

"I ride with Mr. Courtney, then."

"We will make a party of it," said I. "The Princess returns this morning and we will add Mademoiselle d'Essoldé and Colonel Moore."

"But, the chaperon!"

"Hang the chaperon—the grooms can suffice for that. Besides, we shall be back before dark."

"It will be jolly," she said. Then she gave me a shrewd smile. "But, how different from the ride as we planned it."

I looked at Courtney.

"He wasn't in it; was he?" I smiled.

She leaned a bit nearer. "Nor would you have

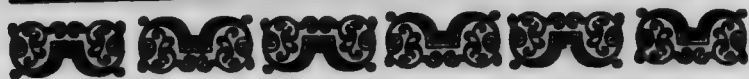
assumed, then, to make engagements for the Princess Royal of Valeria without consulting her," she replied.

I laughed. And I did not deny her inference.

When Moore saluted and turned to leave me that night, I stopped him.

"Colonel," said I, "I trust you enjoyed the supper."

"It was the most delightful I have ever—
heard," he said.



XXIII

AT THE INN OF THE TWISTED PINES

I LUNCED with the King and the Princess Dehra as arranged. Frederick left before the coffee, and Dehra ordered it served in her library. When the footman had brought it she dismissed him.

"Now," said she, "come and tell me all about yourself."

I went over and sat on the arm of her chair. She lit a cigarette and put it between my lips—then, lit one for herself.

"Do you remember the first time you did that?" I asked.

"Yes," said she, "it was the night you flirted so outrageously with me in front of Lotzen."

"I don't care what you call it, since we are not flirting now," said I.

She took my hand between hers and smiled up at me.

"And, maybe, it was not all flirting, then," she said.

There are certain occasions which justify certain actions. I thought this was one.

Then I said: "Tell me about Lotzen's visit with you in the North."

"He was there a week."

"More's the pity," said I.

"For him—yes."

"For him?" I echoed.

She nodded. "I feel very sorry for Ferdinand." Then she blushed. "I think he does love me, Armand."

"I can't blame him for that," said I. "He's a queer sort if he doesn't."

"Foolish!" she laughed, giving me a little tap with her fan. "And you see, dear, he might have had a chance if you had not come."

I bent down until her hair brushed my face.

"And he has none now, sweetheart?" I said softly.

"You know that he has not."

"And does he know it?"

"Yes—he knows it—now. I told him the day he left."

I was beginning to understand Lotzen's sudden change of demeanor toward me.

"What did you tell him, little woman?" I asked.

She looked up with a bright smile.

"See how I've spoiled you," she said.

"Then, spoil me just a little more," I urged.

"Well—I told him it was you," she whispered.

The understanding was growing rapidly.

"And what did he say to that?"

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"I know, Armand, you don't like him; and, there, you may do him an injustice. He said only the kindest things about you—that you were able, courteous, brave—a true Dalberg; and that, if it could not be he, he was glad it was you."

I smiled. "That was clever of him," I commented.

"And he, too, does not believe the Spencer woman's story."

"His cleverness grows," I laughed. "It only remains for him to renounce his right to the Crown."

"He said it was for the King to choose which was the worthier, and that, if it fell to you, he would serve you faithfully and well."

I put my hand on her head and softly stroked her hair.

"And you believed him, dear?" I asked.

She looked up quickly.

"Yes—I believed him. I wanted to believe him—Did he deceive me?"

"Listen," said I. "He reached Dornlitz two days ago. Yesterday afternoon he insulted me repeatedly in my office at Headquarters. Last night I attended the Vierle Masque. While in the Garden I was struck in the back with a dagger."

"Stabbed!" she exclaimed, and clutched my arm.

"No, dear—not even scratched, thanks to Bernheim's steel vest I was wearing. Half an hour later, our cousin of Lotzen, with Mrs. Spencer on his arm, met me, alone, in a retired part of the Garden, forced a duel, and did his level best to run me

through, by a trick of fence he thought he, alone, knew."

"And, again, the vest saved you?"

"No—I was fortunate enough to disarm him."

"Glorious, dear, glorious!" she exclaimed. And tears filled her eyes.

And, as it was I that had caused them, it was but fair that I should take them away.

Then she made me go over the whole story in detail.

"Of course you will tell the King," said she.

"Maybe," said I. "I've not decided yet."

She got up. "There is just time for me to get into riding dress," she said. "But, first; this is Thursday—if you do not tell His Majesty of Lotzen's perfidy by Saturday, I shall do it, myself."

And I knew she would—so I made no protest.

"Put on the green habit and the plumed hat, dear," I said, as I held back the door.

I have always liked green—the dark rich green of the forest's depth—and, if there were anything more lovely than the Princess Dehra, when she came back to me, it is quite beyond my imagination to conceive it. He is a poor lover, indeed, who does not think his sweetheart fair; yet, he would have been a poor sort of man, who would not have been at one with me, that afternoon.

And I told her so—but she called me "Foolish!" once again, and ran from me to the private exit of her suite, where our four companions were awaiting us.

But I had my reward; for she waved the groom aside and let me swing her into saddle and fix her skirt.

How easy it is for a clever woman to manage a man—if she care to try.

It was a beautiful afternoon—the road was soft and the track smooth. Much of it led through woodland and along a brawling stream. The horses were of the sort that delight the soul—I doubt if there were six better saddlers in the whole Kingdom of Valeria. I know there were no prettier women, and, I think, no happier men.

We passed many people—mainly country-men—and they all knew the Princess and loved her—bless her!—if their greetings went for aught. Me, they eyed with frank curiosity; and, more than once, I caught the drift of their comments.

“A pretty pair,” said one, as Uehra and I drew near, our horses on a walk.

“It’s a pity he has a wife,” the other answered. And Dehra frowned.

“They match up well,” said a fellow, as we paused a moment at a spring beside a small road house.

I glanced at Dehra; and got a smile in return.

“That they do. He does not look like a foreigner,” was the answer.

“He is Dalberg on the outside, anyway,” said a third.

“Then, he is Dalberg inside, too—it starts there, with them,” said the first.

And so it went, until we reached the Inn of the Twisted Pines.

It was an old log and plaster building; of many gables and small windows; standing back a trifle from the road, with a high-walled yard on all four sides. I had taken the precaution, that morning, to dispatch an orderly to advise the landlord of our coming; and every human being about the place was drawn up within the enclosure to greet us. Old Boniface met us at the gateway and held my stirrup as I dismounted.

"My poor house has had no such honor," he said, "since the time the Great Henry stopped for breakfast on his return from the Titian War."

"Well, my good man," said I, "you doubtless don't recollect the Great Henry's visit, but, if your supper is what we hope for, I promise you we will honor it as highly as he did that breakfast."

"Your Highness shall be served this instant."

"Give us half an hour and a place to get rid of this dust," said I.

I fancy the Inn had been changed but little since old Henry's day; and the big room, where our table was spread, certainly not at all. The oak floor was bare and worn into ruts and ridges—the great beam rafters overhead were chocolate color from smoke and age—the huge fireplace and the wall above it were black as a half-burnt back log. But the food! My mouth waters now at the thought of it. No crazy French concoctions of frothy indigestibleness; but

good, sweet cooking—the supper one gets among the old families of Maryland or Virginia. It took me back more than a score of years to my young days on the dear old Eastern Shore.

And, in the midst of it, came the jolly Boniface, bearing, as carefully as a mother does her first-born, three long bottles, cobwebbed and dirty. Eighty years had they been lying in the wine-bin of the Inn, guarding their treasure of Imperial Tokay. Now, their ward was ended—and the supper was complete; though, in truth, it had been complete before.

And, when we had eaten the supper and had drunk most of the Tokay, we freshened up the glasses with what remained. Then, arising, I gave the toast which all could drink:

“To the one we love the best!”

But, even as we drained it, there came through the open window the clatter of horse’s hoofs and, as the glasses smashed to bits among the chimney stones, the door swung open and my senior Aide entered, hot and dusty.

He caught my eye, halted sharply, and his hand went up in salute.

“Welcome, Colonel Bernheim,” I said.

Again he saluted; then drew out an envelope and handed it to me.

“Important papers for Your Highness,” he said. “They were received at Headquarters after your departure and, as they required action to-night, I thought it best to follow you.”

With a word of apology, I walked over to the nearest window and slowly read the letters. There were two and they were very brief. Then I read them again—and yet again.

Those at the table had, of course, resumed their talk, but Bernheim still stood at attention. I motioned him to me.

"These are copies," I said.

"I made them, sir, from the originals—while they were en route," he added with a dry smile.

"And the originals?"

"Each was delivered *pr mptly*."

"You have no doubt o. their genuineness?" I asked.

"Absolutely none—though, of course, I know only the handwriting of the answer."

"Well done," said I; "well done!" Then I read the two papers again.

"Do you think he means it?" I asked, tapping the smaller paper.

"After last night, undoubtedly. And you must be there, sir—you and a witness," said Bernheim.

I thought a bit—then I took out my watch. It was just six o'clock.

"There is ample time," said I; "and it's worth the try. Can it be arranged, do you think?"

Bernheim's face brightened. "It can, sir. If it's the room I think it is, there will be no difficulty; and we can depend on the manager—he has been well trained by the Secret Police. You will come?"

"Yes, I'll come; but they come, too," and I nodded toward the table.

"Better bring only Courtney, sir," he urged.

"No," said I; "several witnesses will be needed. And, besides, I want them out of satisfaction to myself."

"It may wreck the whole business," he persisted.

"I'll risk it," said I.

Bernheim was wise. He always seemed to know when to quit.

"Very good, sir," he said. "How soon do we start?"

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"You are a perfect treasure, Bernheim," I said.

"Come, we will start at once. Is your horse good for a fast ride back?"

"Entirely, sir."

"Then you can give me the story on the way," I said. "Meanwhile, get some refreshment."

I went back to the table—and it was amusing how suddenly the conversation ceased and everyone looked at me. I smiled reassuringly at Dehra, for there was concern in her eyes.

"Four of you," said I—"you Princess; and you, Lady Helen; and you, Courtney; and you, Moore, were present at—and you, Mademoiselle d'Essoldé, have heard of—a certain supper party on the Hanging Garden, some weeks back, whereat a certain woman proclaimed herself my wife. That was the first act in a play which has been progressing ever since. The

plot has thickened lately—as witness the duel at the Masque, last night. And now, unless I greatly err, the last act is set for this evening. If you care to see it I shall be glad for your company.”—Then I laughed. “A long speech,” said I; “but it sounded well.”

“And promises best of all,” said Courtney

Then I ordered the horses; and, while we waited, I gave the letters to Courtney.

“Read them,” I said. “The originals passed through Bernheim’s hands this afternoon—‘while en route,’ as he puts it.”

He read them carefully.

“You contemplate giving them an audience?” he asked.

“I . . . that,” said I.

“Is . . . possible?”

“Bernheim says it is.”

He looked at me thoughtfully, a moment. “It would be a great stroke to have the King there,” he said.

“I’ll make a try for him,” I answered; “but the time is very short.”

It was ten miles to Dornlitz, and we did it in an hour. On the way, I explained the whole situation to the Princess and read her the letters. She was amazed—and her indignation was intense. Nor did she hesitate to express it freely before Bernheim. And I saw his stern face break into a glad smile. It told him much.

At the Palace we drew rein.

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"Be at the Hotel Metzen at eight forty-five," said I. "Come by the Court entrance—you will be expected."

Then they rode away, and I hastened to the King.

As good luck would have it, Frederick was in his cabinet and received me instantly. He read the letters and looked at me inquiringly.

"It means a plain talk between them," I explained; "and I propose to hear it. I am sure it would interest Your Majesty—much happened yesterday." And I told him of the Vierle Masque.

Frederick frowned a bit—thought longer—then smiled.

"I don't much fancy eaves-dropping; but, sometimes, the end justifies the means," he said. "I'll join you."

"There will be other witnesses, Sire," I said—and named them.

"I don't like it," he said.

"I can stop them," I suggested.

He considered. "No," said he, "I understand why you want them. I'll come—they will be discreet. And the Princess would wish it so. I'll bring her, myself."

Then I rode to the Metzen. Bernheim had preceded me and, with the manager of the Hotel, awaited me at a side door. The corridor was dimly lighted but I drew my cape well over my face and, in a moment, we were in a small reception room.

"Monsieur Gerst," said I to the manager, "I need your assistance."

Gerst bowed very low.

"Your Royal Highness has but to command," he said.

I was quite sure of that, however. An Archduke of Valeria would have been quite enough, but the Governor of Dornlitz was beyond refusal. I could have closed his Hotel by a word, and there would have been no appeal.

"Thank you, monsieur," I said. "You have, as a guest, a certain Madame Armand Dalberg."

"A guest by Your Highness's express permission, you will remember," he said.

"Very true," said I. "Now, this Madame Dalberg expects a visitor to-night at nine o'clock."

He gave me a quick glance.

"You know him?" I asked.

"No, Your Highness. I only know madame gave orders to admit no one to-night except a gentleman who would come at nine."

I nodded. "It's the same," said I. "And what I want, is to hear all that occurs between Madame Dalberg and this visitor."

Gerst smiled. "That will be easily arranged, Your Highness—the place is already provided."

"The concealed Gallery?" asked Bernheim, quickly?

"Yes, Colonel." Then, to me, he explained: "Madame's reception room was once a part of a

small, state dining-room. Back of the end wall runs a gallery where guests sat to listen to the speeches. It is there, now—and the tapestries, with which the walls are hung, completely hide it.”

“It can be reached from the floor above?” I asked.

“Yes, Your Highness; a narrow stairway admits to it.”

“Can we enter without being overheard by those in the room below?”

“Very readily, sir; the gallery was so designed that its noises would not disturb those in the dining-room.”

“We are in good luck, Bernheim,” I said.

“We shall need all of it, sir, with eight spectators.”

And he was right. It was foolish to risk success for only a sentimental reason. I knew, perfectly well, the proper course was for no one but the King and myself to be in the gallery; yet, there entered my Dalberg stubbornness. I purposed that some of those, who had seen me accused that night on the Hanging Garden, should see me exculpated to-night.

It may be, that some will question the propriety of my action, and the good taste of those who were my guests. As to the latter, it must be borne in mind that my invitation was in the nature of a command, which it would have been vastly discourteous to decline. And, besides, they were my friends. As for myself, I have no excuses to offer—and, methinks, I need none. The situation had long passed the refinement of ethics. It was war; and

war not of my declaring. Neither was I responsible for the style of the campaign. Madeline Spencer deserved no consideration from me—and no more did her visitor.



XXIV

THE END OF THE PLAY

I HAD, yet, an hour to spare, so Bernheim and I returned to the Epsau. I donned the evening uniform of the Red Huzzars, with the broad Ribbon of the Lion across my breast and the Cincinnati around my neck. I was minded to be the Dalberg Archduke to-night.

Then, having dispatched Bernheim to the Palace to escort the King and the Princess, I drove to the Metzen, where Gerst piloted me, by private corridors, to the apartments reserved for me, and which adjoined the Gallery.

The King and the Princess were the last to arrive. As I greeted them, Dehra detained me.

‘Shall we be able to see as well as hear?’ she asked.

“Yes,” said I, “if you wish.”

“I do wish,” she said. “I’m savage to-night.”

I laughed. “It’s very becoming, dear.”

Then the great bell of the Cathedral began to chime the hour; and, with a word of caution, I led the way to the Gallery.

The floor was covered with a thick carpet and

eight small chairs were placed close to the railing. The tapestry was very old and thin and, by putting one's face close to it, the room below was rather dimly, yet quite sufficiently, visible. Its dimensions were unusually ample—possibly forty feet by sixty—and its furnishings most gorgeous. The chandelier and side-lights were burning, and a huge vase lamp, pink shaded, was on the large table in the centre. At the moment, the room was untenanted.

In a little while a door opposite the Gallery opened and Madeline Spencer entered.

A woman usually knows her good points physically and how to bring them out. And Mrs. Spencer was an adept in the art—though, in truth, little art was needed. To her, Nature had been over generous.

She affected black; and that was her gown, now—cut daringly low and without a jot of color about it, save the dead white of her arms and shoulders, and a huge bunch of violets at her waist.

I thought I could guess whence the flowers came. And, though I despised her, yet, I could but admit her dazzling beauty.

She moved slowly about the room, touching an ornament here, a picture there. At length, she came to the table and, dropping languidly into a chair, rested her elbow on the arm and, with chin in hand, stared into vacancy.

Presently, there was a sharp knock at the corridor door. She glanced quickly at the clock—then,

picked up a book and, sinking back in easy posture, assumed to read.

"*Entrée*," she called, without looking up.

The door opened instantly and a man entered. A long military cloak was over his plain evening dress; one fold was raised to hide his face. He dropped it as he closed the door.

Mrs. Spencer lowered her book—then arose with all the sinuous grace she knew so well how to assume.

"Welcome, Your Royal Highness," she said, and curtsied very low. "It was good of you to come."

The Duke of Lotzen tossed off his cloak—and, coming quickly over, took her hand and kissed it.

"It was more than good of you to let me come," he answered.

"I feared you might not get my note," she said. "I believe I am under constant surveillance."

He smiled. "Even the Secret Police would hesitate to tamper with my mail," he said.

"That was my hope," she answered.

He looked at her steadily, a moment.

"I am always ready to be a—hope to you," he said.

She dropped her eyes—then picked up a cigarette case from the table.

"Will Your Royal Highness smoke?" she asked.

"If you will light it for me."

(The Princess pressed my hand. I understood.)

Mrs. Spencer touched the cigarette to the tiny alcohol flame; then offered it to the Duke.

"Someone has spoiled you," she said lightly. Lotzen took her hand and, with it, put the cigarette between his lips.

"Unfortunately, no," he answered. "But I once saw a pretty woman do that for another man."

(Again Dehra pressed my fingers.)

"And did he hold her hand afterward?" she asked—freeing her own from the Duke's.

"They were not alone," he said—and tried to take it again.

But she put both hands behind her.

"Come, Your Highness, this is not the Masque," she said. But there was no reproof in her tones.

"Tell me," said he; "how did you know me, last night?"

"What matters it? Particularly, since it was only because you knew me that you spoke."

"You think I was searching for you?" he asked.

She blew a cloud of smoke under the lamp shade and watched it float out at the top.

"Were you?" she asked.

"If I said yes, would it please you?"

"Not unless I thought it true, monsieur—and, also, knew the reason."

He looked at her steadily a moment.

"What better reason could I have than that you are the most beautiful woman in Valeria?"

She put her fan before her face.

"Your Highness's compliment is very delicate," she laughed.

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"It wasn't meant for a compliment," he answered. "If you have looked in your mirror, to-nig'it, you know I speak the simple truth."

She got up and went over to a great glass, on the opposite wall. Lotzen followed her; and they stood there, a bit, looking in it.

"You like me in black?" she asked, smiling at him in the mirror.

"I like you in anything," he answered—and made as though to put his arm around her waist.

She swung quickly away from him—just out of reach.

"Even in a gypsy dress?" she asked.

"It was charming—but, I think I prefer this," and he nodded toward her gleaming shoulders.

She made a gesture of dissent, and they went back to the table. Lotzen drew a small chair close and sat staring at her. She studied her fan and waited.

Then he hooked his hands about his knee and leaned back.

"Do you know," he said, "it's a crying shame you are married to my dear cousin."

She looked him full in the face—and smiled.

"Why didn't you make me a widow, then, last night, when you had the chance?"

Lotzen shrugged his shoulders.

"The chance was all right, but the end was bad—though you didn't stay to see it."

She laughed. "Didn't I? I stayed long enough to

see your sword sticking in the turf. I took that to be the end—was there more of it, later?"

"No; that was the end—for that time."

"And for that particular method, I fancy," said she.

"He wields a pretty blade."

"Had you known it?" he asked.

"He was the best swordsman in the American Army," she answered.

"Ordinarily, that does not mean much," said Lotzen. "But, as a matter of fact, so far as I know, he has got only one superior in Europe."

"Then why not get that chap to fight him?"

The Duke laughed.

"I would be very willing to; only, the chap happens to be that infernal Irish adventurer, Moore, who is on his Staff."

"Why don't you try it again, yourself?" she asked.

He tapped his cigarette carefully against the ash receiver.

"Because I'm not yet tired of life," he said. "I know when I have met my master."

"But, one of your thrusts might go home," she insisted.

He looked at her with an amused smile.

"Yes—it might," he said. "But, you see, my dear girl, what troubles me are the many thrusts he has, any one of which would be sure to go home in me."

"You seem to have escaped, last night," she observed.

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"Purely by his favor—even luck hadn't a finger in it."

"But discretion had," she remarked. "He would not dare kill you."

Lotzen shook his head.

"You don't seem to know this husband of yours. A Dalberg will dare anything."

"Some Dalbergs," she scoffed.

The Duke flushed.

"I'm doing badly—you think me a coward," he said.

"Oh, no, Prince—only carefully discreet;" and she leaned back and slowly fanned herself.

He looked at her for a bit.

"Are you aware, my dear, that you are conniving at—some might call it instigating—the death of your husband?" he asked.

She smiled. "Am I?"

"It is a very extraordinary situation," he said, blowing a ring of smoke and watching it circle away. "You are so tired of him you want him killed; he seems equally tired of you, and, moreover, he is determined to marry another woman. Yet, neither of you gets a divorce—and you actually follow him here—and he, then, actually refuses to let you depart."

The fan kept moving slowly.

"A very extraordinary situation, indeed, Your Highness,—as you state it," she said.

"As I state it?" he echoed.

She nodded. "You have omitted the one material fact in the case."

"And what is that?" he asked.

The fan stopped, and she laughed lightly.

"Simply this: I am not Armand Dalberg's wife."

(Dehra reached over and took my hand. The King looked at us both and nodded; then clapped me on the knee.)

For a space, Lotzen stared at Mrs. Spencer—and she smiled sweetly back at him.

"Not his wife!" he ejaculated, presently.

Her smile became a laugh.

"No, monsieur; not his wife."

This time, Lotzen's stare was even longer. Then, suddenly, he laughed.

"I thought, for a moment, you actually meant it," he said.

She put both elbows on the table and leaned forward.

"Come, monsieur, let us be frank with each other," she said. "Not only am I not Armand Dalberg's wife, but you have always known it."

He frowned. "My dear girl," he said, "I've been sorrowfully accepting your own word that you are his wife; how should I know that you've been——" he hesitated.

She finished it for him—

"Lying, Duke, lying," she laughed.

He held up his hands, protestingly.

"Not at all, my dear; teasing is the word I wanted.

She lay back in the chair and laughed softly to herself.

"Do you fancy the Grand Duke Armand would call it teasing?" she asked.

He joined in the laugh.

"The victim never sees the joke," he said.

She sat up sharply.

"So, then, it was intended only as a joke?" she exclaimed. "I thought it had another object."

He frowned again.

"I don't quite follow you," he said

She looked at him with a queer smile.

"My being brought to Valeria to pose as his wife," she explained.

"You don't mean you came here from America expressly for that purpose?" he asked.

Her smile grew broader.

"Really, Duke, you are most delicious," she said. "Armand Dalberg told me, the other day, that I played my part beautifully—he should see you. You are a *premier artiste*."

"Madame flatters me," Lotzen answered with soft irony; then tried for her hand—and failed.

"Well, you may take it so," said she; "but, believe me, your cousin didn't mean it so, to me."

He moved over and sat on the edge of the table near her.

She leaned far back and put her hands behind her.

"Come, my dear, don't be so mysterious," he said.

"Let us be frank, as you suggest. You say you are not Armand's wife—that, I am only too glad to believe; I am delighted. You say I have always known it—that, of course, is a mistake. You say I am playing a part, now—that, I don't understand."

"*Premier artiste*, surely," she laughed. Then, suddenly, grew sober. "By all means, let us have a frank talk," she said. "It was for that I asked you here to-night—But, first, light me a cigarette, and then go and sit down in that chair."

"Buy me with a smile," he said.

She bought him—then he did her bidding.

"I was silly enough to hope it was only I that you wanted to see," he said.

"My note gave no ground for such hopes, Your Highness," she said. "I told you exactly what I wanted—to discuss a matter of immediate importance."

"Oh, yes, I know—but then I was still thinking of the Masque."

She looked at him naïvely. "Surely, Duke, you are old enough to know that, of all follies, a Masque is chiefest and dies with the break of day."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am learning it, now, at any rate."

"And, don't forget, it was you who ended the pleasant promenade, to pick a quarrel with the—Masque in Black."

"But with full purpose to resume it in a moment."

"After you had killed him? Very likely! Your sole thought would have been to get away."

"And to take you with me," he added.

She laughed. "Nonsense, Duke; besides, I would not have gone."

"And the promenade?" he asked.

"With the Black Masque dead the promenade would have been no longer necessary."

"Oh," said he: "I'm beginning to understand. You met me last night for a particular purpose; and that, being frustrated by the duel, is the reason for the appointment here this evening."

She was leaning idly back, and the fan had resumed its languid motions.

"Your Highness has stated it with charming exactness," she said.

His face grew stern; and I saw the hand, that hung beside his chair, clench sharply. Mrs. Spencer saw it, too.

"Don't be angry, Duke," she laughed. "Be grateful for the privilege it gives you of being here to-night."

Lotzen got up sharply and took a step toward the door.

"Going, Your Highness?" asked that softly-caressing voice.

He swung around. "No, I'm not going," he said—and sat down. "A man would be a fool to leave you just because you treated him heartlessly."

This time, she lit the cigarette, voluntarily, and, leaning over, put it between his lips.

"Is that the way you saw it done?" she asked.

He seized her hand and held it for a moment; but, when he bent over it, she whisked it quickly away.

"Now, for the frank talk," she laughed.

"By all means," he said—and settled back to listen.

She toyed with her cigarette; blowing the smoke at the shade and watching it rush out at the top. It seemed to be a favorite trick of hers.

"Of course, Your Highness is aware that, by order of the Governor of Dornlitz, I am kept a prisoner within the walls of the inner city."

Lotzen bowed. "So, I have been informed."

"I have tried every possible means to escape: disguise, bribes, flattery—and all of no avail. My every motion is watched. I am dogged by half the Secret Police of the Capital. I'm not even sure of the fidelity of my own maid."

"You poor child," said Lotzen.

"I am sick of this sort of life. It's worse than a prison cell. And it's got to end—and that, promptly. I sought you, last night, at the Masque to tell you that you must get me away and out of this miserable Country. I have completed my bargain; it is now for you to complete yours."

The Duke's face took on a look of perplexity.

"My dear girl," he said, "I haven't the remotest notion what you mean by your bargain and mine; but, I'm very ready to aid you to escape. The difficulty is, I have absolutely no power over a single soldier or official in Dornlitz. The Governor's

orders are absolute—none but the King can reverse them. And, alas! at this moment, I have very little influence with His Majesty.”

“Then, you decline to aid me?” she asked, very quietly—the smoke was again going through the lamp shade.

“On the contrary, I am ready to do anything I can; but, I fear, I’m powerless. Indeed, if you’re under the close surveillance you indicate, it would be about impossible. And I know whereof I speak. You would be no more immune in my carriage than in a public cab. Even if I were beside you, you could not pass the gates. It might, however, be effected in some way I cannot scheme, on the instant. I will investigate and, if I can devise any method, I shall do my utmost to release you.”

She straightened up—and the fan quit its beating.

“That sounds well—and may mean well; but, it’s short of the mark,” said she. “I am determined not to remain in this town another day. You must get me away before to-morrow night.”

“Impossible!” Lotzen exclaimed. “You know not what you ask.”

She looked at him coldly.

“Very good, Your Highness,” she said. “I have given you your chance. I have played fair with you. Now, we are quits.”

“And you don’t want my aid?” he asked.

“Not unless it’s given before noon to-morrow.”

He raised his hands.

"There are only two people in the world who could get you out of Dornlitz by noon to-morrow—the King and the Governor."

"Exactly," said she. "And, to one of them, I shall go in the morning."

"Better try Frederick," Lotzen laughed. "He has a weak side for a pretty woman."

(I did not look at the King—but I heard him sniff angrily.)

"No—I shall try the Governor," she returned. "He told me, one day, in his office, that, when I acknowledged that I was not his wife and that the marriage certificate was false, I would be permitted to leave the Kingdom." She paused, a moment. "Does Your Highness wish me to go to the Governor?"

I thought the Duke would weaken—but, as usual, I got a surprise.

"My dear girl," said he, "I shall be heartbroken if you leave Valeria—but, if that is all you need to do to be free to go—and you are not, in fact, Armand Dalberg's wife—then I am surprised that you have not done it long ago."

She smiled, rather sadly.

"Yes, I fancy you are. I'm rather surprised myself. It would sound queer, to some people in America, but I have actually tried, for once in my life, to keep faith to the end. But it is as I always thought—not worth the while. I'll know better again."

Then, she got up and, going behind her chair, leaned over the back.

"Does Your Highness realize what my going to the Governor means to you?" she asked.

"I don't seem to be able to follow your argument," he said; "and I'm a poor guesser of riddles."

"It means that I shall have to tell the whole ugly story of how I chanced to come to Dornlitz to pose as the wife of the Grand Duke Armand."

He took a fresh cigarette and carefully lit it.

"But, my dear girl," he said, "I don't see how that would affect me?"

She laughed.

"Still the *premier artiste*! Well, play it out. If you want to hear what you already know it's no trouble to tell you. Shall I begin at the very beginning?"

"By all means!" said he. "Maybe, then, I can catch the point."

"Listen," said she. "For many years I have known Armand Dalberg. One day, several months ago, there came a man to me, in the City of New York. How he happened to find me is no matter. He spoke English perfectly—though I thought he was a Frenchman. The name on his card was Herbert Wilkes; but, I knew that was assumed, and I have learned, lately, who he is. Since you, too, know, it is quite unnecessary to repeat it. His offer to me was this: If I would go immediately to Dornlitz and publicly claim the American, Armand Dalberg—who had just been restored to

his rightful place as a Grand Duke of Valeria—as my husband, I was to receive an enormous sum of money (the amount Your Highness also knows) and all expenses. I accepted instantly, mainly for the money; but, also, to satisfy a personal grudge I had against Major Dalberg. I made the one condition, however, that a marriage certificate must be procured—the date for which I gave; choosing one on which I happened to know Major Dalberg was in New York. And it was done. How, I neither knew nor cared. One-half the money was given me in advance—the balance to be paid the day I executed my mission. I received it the morning following that scene at the Grand Duke's supper party at the Hanging Garden. And, God knows, I earned every cent of it! I was guaranteed protection while in Valeria, and to be at liberty to depart one week after I had made the public assertion of the marriage and had exhibited the certificate."

She paused.

"Now, perchance, Your Highness understands the matter," she added, and smiled sweetly.

He flicked the ash from his cigarette and shook his head.

"I understand no more than I did at first, how this plot against the Grand Duke Armand affects me," he said.

"Of course, it may not occur to Your Highness—but it doubtless would to the King—who, of all living creatures, would be most benefited and who

most injured by my marriage story. However, if you are not my employer, then, it will not hurt you. And, as I cannot imagine who else it could be, I shall simply fling the whole business overboard; go to the Governor to-morrow; tell the truth; endorse on the marriage certificate the fact of its falseness; give it to him—and take the first train for Paris—And, I fancy, I shall read the betrothal notice of the Princess Royal of Valeria and the Grand Duke Armand before I've been there a week."

Lotzen got up and went over to her.

"Do you know you are a very clever woman?" he said.

She looked archly up at him.

"You will enable me to escape?" she asked.

He took her hand—and, this time, it was not withdrawn.

"I will do my best," he said, "but, it's a fierce risk for me. If detected, it would mean, at the very least, a year's banishment.

She smiled.

"It would mean something more than that if I told my story," she said.

"I'm doing it for you; not from fear of the story," he said softly.

"It's nicer, that way, isn't it?" she asked.

He put his arm around her—and she let him kiss her, once. Then, she drew away.

"Sit down and let us talk it over," she said.

The King got up suddenly.

"Come along, Armand," he said, and hurried from the Gallery.

I followed him, without a word—for none was needed. The end of Lotzen's game was very near, indeed.

In the lower corridor, we met a servant.

"Show us to the apartments of Madame Dalberg," Frederick ordered.

A dozen steps brought us to a large double door.

"This is the entrance, Your Majesty," said the man.

The King rapped sharply. There was no prompt answer and he rapped again.

In a moment, the door was opened by Mrs. Spencer's maid.

"Madame is not at home," she said mechanically.

Without a word Frederick brushed her aside and stepped quickly in—and I after him.

Mrs. Spencer sat facing the door and saw us enter. It is inconceivable that she should not have been surprised, and, yet, she betrayed absolutely no sign of it. Indeed, one would have thought we were expected guests. Truly, she was a very wonderful woman.

She said something, very low, to the Duke; then, came forward and curtsied to the King.

"Your Majesty honors me overmuch," she said. And then to me—"Does this really mean that Your

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Royal Highness has at last decided to acknowledge me.

Meanwhile, Lotzen had arisen and was standing stiffly at attention, his eyes on the King. I thought his face was a trifle pale—and I did not wonder.

Frederik laughed, curtly, and motioned for her to rise.

"The play is over, Mrs. Spencer," he said. "We will have no more acting, if you please."

She straightened, instantly.

"Your Majesty is pleased to be discourteous—but it seems to be a Dalberg characteristic," she sneered. Then she broke out angrily: "And, as neither you nor that renegade there,"—indicating me with a nod and a look,—“was invited here, I take it I am quite justified in requesting you both to depart. You may be a King, but that gives you no privilege to force your way into a woman's apartments and insult her. You are a brave gentleman, surely, and a worthy monarch. I suppose you brought your pet to protect you lest I offer you violence. Well, I'll give him the chance."

Even as she said it, like a flash, she seized a heavy glass vase from the table and hurled it straight at the King.

It was not a woman's throw. Madeline Spencer had learned the man's swing, in her Army days, and, had the vase struck home, the chances are there would have been a new King in Dornlitz, that night.

And such was Lotsen's thought, for he smiled wickedly and glanced at me.

But, quick though she was, the King was quicker. He jerked his head aside. The vase missed him by the fraction of an inch and crashed to bits against the opposite wall.

Frederick turned and looked at the fragments, and at the cut in the hangings.

"Madame is rather muscular," he observed, dryly.

"And Your Majesty is a clever dodger," she said, with sneering indifference—then leaned back against the table, a hand on either side of her.

"Is it possible you are not going?" she asked.

The King smiled. "Presently, my dear madame, presently. Meanwhile, I pray you, have consideration for the ornaments and the wall."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As I cannot expect the servants to forcibly eject their King, and as the Duke of Lotzen dare not, I presume I'll have to submit to your impertinent intrusion. Pray, let me know your business here—I assume it is business—and get it ended quickly. I will expedite it all I may. Anything, to be rid of you and that popinjay in red beside you."

"Your husband, madame," the King observed.

"Aye, my husband, for a time," she answered.

"Aye, Mrs. Spencer, your husband for a time—for a purpose—and for a consideration."

She opened her eyes wide.

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"Indeed!" she laughed. "I thought the acting was over, Sire."

Frederick's manner changed.

"It is," he said sharply. "We will come to the point. Have you ink and pen?"

"Is that what you came for?" she sneered. "Have you none at the Palace?"

"Quite enough to sign an order within an hour for your incarceration if you continue obdurate," he answered.

"A kingly threat, truly," she mocked. "And, what if I be not obdurate?"

"Then it will be an order permitting you to leave Valeria at once."

"Now, Your Majesty interests me," she said. "I have been waiting for that a month and more. What is the price for this order?"

"Simply the truth, madame," said the King.

"Sometimes, the truth is the highest price one can pay," she answered.

"It will be very easy here," he said. "You have a paper purporting to be a certificate of marriage between you and Armand Dalberg."

She inclined her head.

"On it you will endorse that it is a false certificate, that you are not and never were his wife; that it was procured for you, in New York, long subsequent to its apparent date; and that you were paid an enormous sum of money—fill in the actual amount, please—to go immediately to Dornlitz, exhibit the cer-

tificate, there, and publicly claim the Grand Duke Armand as your husband. That, madame, is all."

I was observing Lotzen; and, even now, his nerve never failed him. He watched the King, intently, as he spoke. At the end, his face took on a smile of cynical indifference—and, dropping from the respectful position in which he had been standing, he turned and sat on the table, one leg swinging carelessly over the corner.

Mrs. Spencer shot a quick glance at him—but he gave no answer back.

"Your Majesty has omitted one little matter," she said. "By whom shall I say the money was paid?"

"Thank you—so I had. Make it—by persons to you unknown."

Mrs. Spencer smiled frankly.

"Your Majesty was quite right," she said. "The play is over."

She touched a bell—the maid entered.

"My jewel case," she said.

The King crossed to a writing desk and, taking pen and ink, placed them on the table. Then the maid brought the casket.

From the bottom tray, Mrs. Spencer took a paper and handed it to the King, who, after a glance, returned it.

"If your Majesty will dictate, I will write," she said.

Slowly, Frederick repeated the confession—and the pen scratched out line after line on the white

page. When it was ended, she passed it back again to the King, and he read it carefully.

"Sign it, please," he said.

She looked up, with an amused smile.

"With what name?" she asked.

"Your lawful one," said Frederick.

"Madeline Spencer," she answered—and dashed it off.

Then, for the first time since we entered the room, the King looked at Lotzen. Hitherto, he had ignored him, utterly.

"Witness it," he said sternly.

I smiled—and so did Madeline Spencer. It was the refinement of retribution.

Without a word or a change of feature, Lotzen obeyed. Then Frederick, himself, signed it; and, folding it carefully, gave it to me.

"Will Your Majesty graciously pardon the violence I offered you?" Mrs. Spencer said.

Frederick nodded.

"Readily, madame," he said. "In a way, you were justified—and, then, you missed me. Had you hit me, my pardon might not have been required."

"And will you not tell me how you discovered the truth?" she asked.

"I chanced to learn of this meeting with His Royal Highness, the Duke of Lotzen, and was a witness of all that occurred here between you."

"You cannot mean that you overheard our conversation!" she exclaimed.

"Every word," said the King.

"But where—and how?"

The Duke glanced up toward the Gallery—and a bitter smile crossed his face.

"His Grace of Lotsen has guessed it," said Frederick.

She turned to the Duke interrogatingly.

"The gallery—behind the arras, yonder," he said.

"Exactly," said the King.

"And you forgot the Gallery?" Mrs. Spencer asked, mockingly.

"Yes," said he, with a shrug and a lift of his eyebrows, "I forgot it."

She turned to the King.

"I shall be ready, Sire, to depart for Paris on the evening train, to-morrow," she said.

"You shall have the permit in the morning," he answered.

Then he turned to Lotsen—and the Duke saw and understood. He straightened up and his heels came together sharply.

Frederick looked at him, sternly for a moment.

"It is unnecessary, sir, for me to particularize," he said. "You know your crimes and their purpose—so do I. The Court has no present need of plotters and will be the better for your absence. It has been over long since you visited your titular estates, and they doubtless require your immediate attention. You are, therefore, permitted to depart to them forthwith—and to remain indefinitely."

Lotzen's hand rose in salute.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he answered.

The King bowed to Mrs. Spencer.

"Madame, I bid you good evening and good-bye," he said.

She curtsied low.

"I thank Your Majesty for your gracious consideration," she said.

Then she stepped quickly toward me and held out her hand.

"Will you not say farewell, Armand—as in the days, long past?" she asked.

I knew the Princess was looking; but I was in a generous mood. I took her hand and bowed over it.

"Captain Dalberg bids farewell to Colonel Spencer's wife," I said.

Then I followed the King.

A week has passed since the night in the Gallery. Madeline Spencer has gone—forever from my path, I trust. His Royal Highness, the Duke of Lotzen, has taken a long leave, and is sojourning on his mountain estates for the benefit of his health. There has been another supper of six at the Inn of the Twisted Pines—with four bottles of Imperial Tokay; and, afterward, a charming ride home in the moonlight.

To-night, there is to be a great State Dinner at the Palace, whereat His Majesty will formally announce

the betrothal of the Princess Royal of Valeria and Field Marshal, the Grand Duke Armand.

So much I know—and, surely, it is enough; and far more than enough. Yet, having that fixed and settled, there is another matter touching which Dehra and I have a vast curiosity:

What says the great, brass-bound Laws of the Dalbergs? Has the Order of Succession been changed? Will I supplant Lotzen as the Heir Presumptive?

But, on that, His Majesty is silent; and the Book is locked. Nor does even the Princess venture to inquire. Perchance, he is reserving it for a surprise at the Dinner, to-night. Perchance, he thinks I have honor sufficient.

Yet, none the less, do I wonder; and, I confess it, none the less do I hope. Nor is the hope for myself alone—for, to be an Archduke of Valeria is rank enough for any man—but, also, for her whom I love, and the Nation loves, and who was born to wear a Crown.

And, for her dear sake, do I pray, with all humility, yet, somehow, with the confidence of Right, that, in my unworthy self, the Line of stubborn old Hugo may come to its own again.

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